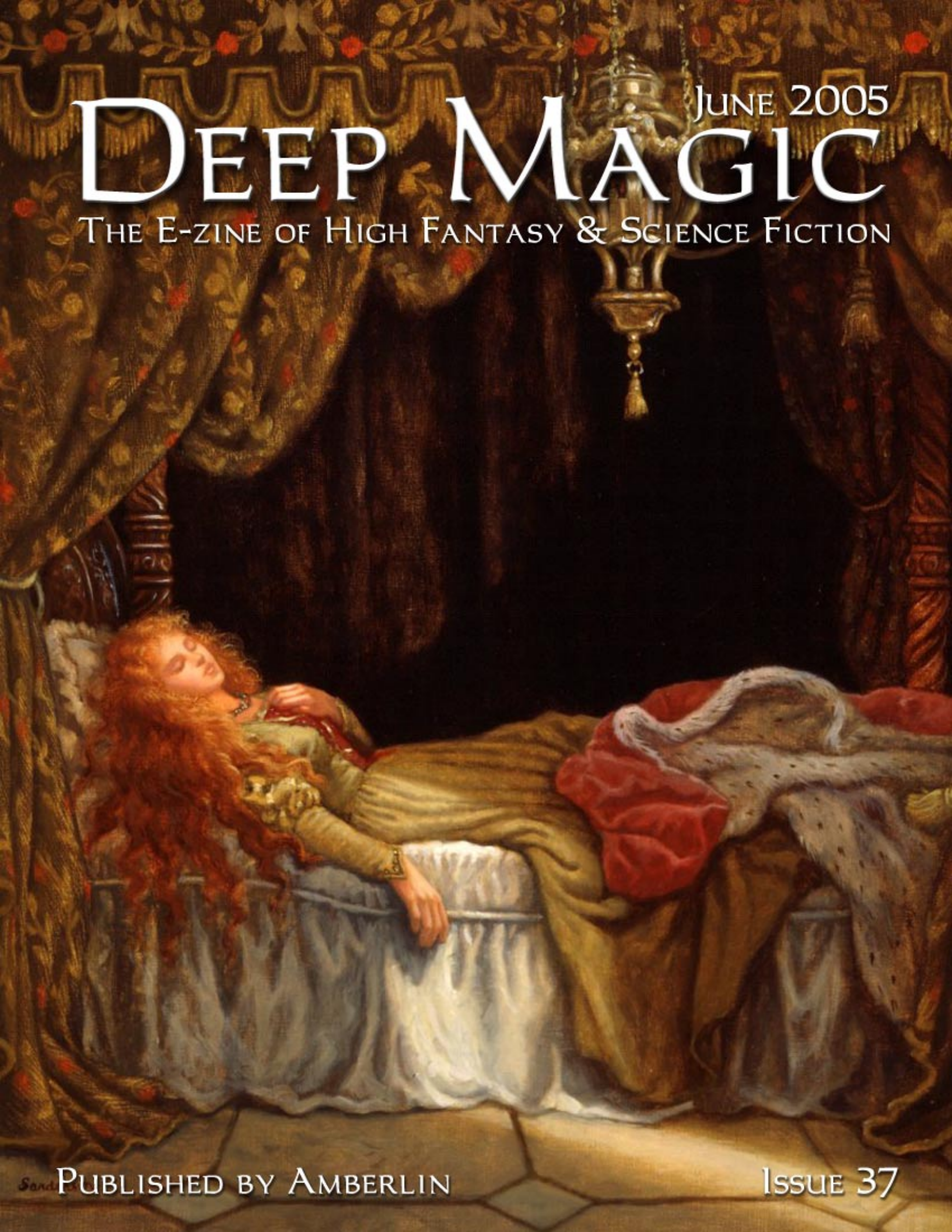

Deep Magic

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We would like to welcome our newest staff members, Ida Clinkscales and Amy R. Butler, who answered our call for staff members several months ago. Ida will be reviewing books, and Amy will work as a copyediter. Welcome them both to Deep Magic!

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Would you like to know when the next issue of Deep Magic is released? Sign up for our mailing list for free. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers.

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June 2005

I believe I quote Calvin when I say that we are now in the halcyon days of our youth... that is Calvin of Calvin & Hobbes. And the halcyon days of which I speak are the green days of summer. Wading pools, butterfly nets, kite flying, sand boxes, picnics, gardens, hikes, walks around the block, camping, fishing, baseball, library books, trampolines, soccer, golf, sidewalk chalk, hopscotch, and frogs in pockets await.

We are excited to kick off the summer reading season (for you northern hemisphere readers) at Deep Magic. We begin a new era, where we are paying our authors and still offering the publication for free. Thanks to all of our author-readers who have submitted their fiction to us in greater numbers than we had ever before experienced. It is an exciting time of growth and change—just like summer itself.

This issue includes a wonderful array of fantasy fiction. We continue with the next segment of *Shadowloom*, a great fantasy novel by our friend, Mark Reeder. We also offer three incredible fantasy short stories: "Jodhin" by Q. S. Archer, "A Sorcerous Mist" by Simon Kewin, and "Places Underground" by Marcie Lynn Tentchoff.

Gracing our cover and pages within are some outstanding images created by feature artist, Ruth Sanderson. Her work includes dramatic depictions of fantasy forms. We think you will enjoy her interview as well.

We also present two interesting articles that aspiring writers will find of value, "The Writer's Secret Weapon," by Gail Dayton, and "Ten Rules for Writing Dialogue and Packing for Fantasy Conventions," by Jeff Wheeler and Brendon Taylor. The latter article is derived from the seminar Jeff and Brendon taught on dialogue writing at the Opus Fantasy Arts Festival in Denver, Colorado, in May.

Welcome to another summer of imagination at Deep Magic.

Enjoy!
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. **We have a new due date for Writing Challenge submissions!** They will be printed one month later, and you have longer to submit them. Please note the deadline date below.

June 2005 Writing Challenge
Entries due July 10, 2005

This month's writing challenge is inspired by Gail Dayton's article on emotion in this month's issue. Emotion is what draws a reader into the story and what gets them attached to your characters. The trick is conveying the proper amount of emotion without overdoing it or leaving the reader with no attachment. Emotion can be conveyed through words, actions, body language, and more. Read Gail Dayton's article, then write a short scene involving one or more characters. Pick an emotion you want to convey to the reader, then bring it out through the characters' words, actions, mannerisms, or a combination of the three.

Keep your submissions for this challenge to 500 words.

Selections from the April 2005 Writing Challenge

Barding My Time
Remember the Words
Song of the Mute
The Old Has Passed Away...

The above stories were selected from the April challenge, which was to write a scene using the cover of the April issue as inspiration.

Don't forget the May challenge due June 10:

The writing challenge for this month is a little macabre, but it is intentional. Death is a subject that has been around for a long time. But what happens to the soul or memories of a person who has passed on? This theme has played out in literature and movies (think movies like Always, Titanic, Somewhere in Time–even the Star Wars saga has portayed the ghosts of the Force since The Empire Strikes Back hit theaters). The challenge is simple. Write a story about a character who has just died and comes to realize that the afterlife isn't exactly what they had imagined it to be. And since this is a fantasy and science fiction e-zine and not a religious institution, keep it interesting and creative and set in a universe or planet in the genre. We are excited to see the creative afterlives that exist in your imagination. We will be even more excited if you keep it under 1000 words.

Barding My Time

By Erik R. Van Asch

No matter how many times I visit, I never seem to get used to the rancid stench of a Kiralli dungeon. Nevertheless, I am thankful to the One that there are so few bards left in the land. This simple fact keeps my layovers brief, as there is always need for skilled artists to sing songs, tell fantastic stories or recite the treasured history of the land of Dalnar to the rich and bored.

"Up, you lazy minstrel," barked the prison guard.

I looked up from my palliasse at the beady, close-set eyes staring back at me through the iron bars that comprised my cell. I stood and brushed debris from my tunic wishing I could also brush away the clinging malodor.

"My good Luxor, your bedside manner is a blessed constant. How goes it with your daughter?" The hard eyes softened dramatically and the large man looked over his shoulder, then back at me.

"She is much improved, milord," he whispered. "I do exactly as you say. The song you teach me I sing to her three times a day. Methinks she will walk again by the new moon. I'm forever in your debt." His five-year-old daughter had shattered her right leg in a horse cart accident and was told there was nothing to be done for her.

The prison guard opened the cell door and filled the opening with his exceptional girth. His clothes were heavily worn and patched, making them not much better than that of the inmates. This made me believe the poor advice he received was due to the fact he couldn't better line the physician's pocket.

"You are quite welcome, my good man. And you can start repaying me by letting me get out of this God-forsaken pit so I can fill my lungs with clear, free air."

"Sorry milord, not today," said the man with downcast eyes. That was when I noticed the two armed guards standing behind Luxor. Even worse was the Executioner standing right behind them.

"I see my telling of Baron Janu's murderous, pilaging uncle didn't sit well with the Baroness. It still amazes me how people think that the past can be erased if ignored. Oh well, so be it." I held up my right foot so he could release the manacle and chain that bound me to the wall. Once unlocked, he stepped aside and I followed the Executioner with the sword-bearing guards flanking me.

I began to hum a little tune as we passed through the dungeon's many-locked doors. My performance was rewarded with a smart rap on the back of the head by a sword hilt and an equally blunt command to be quiet. As we emerged, the daylight stung my eyes and my ears were smothered with the crowd's chanting, "Off with his head."

"I think this is the largest audience I've ever had. At least they are enthusiastic," I said. My humor only rewarded me another rap upon the head.

The Executioner led me to a three-foot-high stage, upon which the chopping block awaited me. Beside it the Executioner's axe leaned against a small table bearing my belongings. To one side a coffin lay in wait for me. The hooded man directed me to a worn spot and I took my place in front of the block.

A thin, haughty-eyed magistrate began to read off my charges. I expected the list and wasn't completely surprised when he stated the final one as, "Assault upon a royal and his family's line." I just shook my head in disgust at how the charge implied something totally different than my true crimes. Regardless, the bloodthirsty crowd didn't care why I was there; they simply picked up their chant with more zeal.

"Any last requests?" asked the magistrate.

"Actually, yes. With such a fine audience before me, I would like to have my mandolin to sing one last song." I bowed to the magistrate knowing that he wasn't required to acquiesce. He looked me up and down and then nodded to a guard sitting nearby who rose and pulled the instrument from the pile upon the table and handed it to me.

"Good people of Kiralli. The only thing I'm guilty of is telling the truth. And though it may be tragic that one as honest as I would receive such a sentencing, I choose to leave you with a song of old. In the Great War, five hundred years ago, bards were at the forefront of the king's host. Their battle songs carried magic that empowered the troops and turned the tide of many wars. Though such lore is near forgotten, I will sing an ancient Kiralli lullabye." At this the crowd grew quiet, willing to forgo my head for a bit of music in return.

I plucked at the strings of the instrument. My voice rose, melding with the chords as I worked the magic. I sang and played as I turned, making my enchantment heard with each new direction I faced. Angry eyes grew softer and eventually closed. Within a minute I strummed the final notes and was greeted by the quiet breathing of sleeping people.

I sighed heavily. Disappointed I'd have to depart a silent crowd instead of an applauding one, I moved around bodies that slept where they stood and collected my things. Though none could be roused immediately, I realized the spell lasted only seven degrees of the dial's shadow. This meant I didn't have a great deal of time to flee the city.

I turned and looked at the unmoving Luxor and wished him and his the best. Springing down from the stage I ran out through the courthouse gate. Suddenly realizing I no longer would have to endure the fetid Kiralli dungeon again, I began to hum an upbeat tune. Happy to not receive a rap on the head for my display, I disappeared into the city beyond.

Remember the Words

By Jeremy Rozen

The flow of spirits and loosening of lips didn't bother Bertram a bit. He stood behind the big oak bar, whistling away whilst he shined and then refilled the mugs. It had been a busy night, a really good take and those twenty barrels of ale had sent many patrons stumbling off into the darkness of night, singing their way down the streets. Still, a group of hangers-on milled about one of the tables to the left of the bar, beyond the light from the fireplace.

Boisterous cries of, "C'mon, you can beat 'im, 'ees no match fer ya!" and, "Don' let 'im do tha' to ye, fight back, fight back!" rose above the din and Bertram did not like the sounds of it.

He rolled up his sleeves and swung his weight around the bar. He rumbled through the crowd, a big man, well-muscled. Generally a calm man, he had his limits and one of them was that there be no brawling in his bar. Pressure rose and pulse raced.

Out of breath, Bertram reached the table, "Arm wrasslin'?" He huffed and then broke out laughing, "Should 'ave known. Here I am fumin' mad with an 'ead of dragon steam over nothin'." The stunned crowd had a good laugh too.

Bertram let out a deep breath, "So, who's takin' wagers then, Lintle?"

A thin, older man stepped to him, "Aye, as usual."

"A quid on Jauul," he said, shoving coins into Lintle's palm.

Bertram recognized mostly everyone there, except for a particular stranger who caught his attention. He seemed a curious fellow, leaning against the mantle in his brightly colored jacket and yellow, puffed cap. Bertram shook his head at the sight of him and made his way to the front door.

"Alright, who challenges me?" A large, dark-skinned man stood from his seat, face tattooed with black symbols, eyes like coal. "Well?"

"Settle down, Jauul," Bertram shouted, bolting the lock, "There now, no interruptions."

Through the crowd marched a Dwarf, eager to accept the challenge. Muscular arms pumped and the Dwarf fought well, but it was Jauul who prevailed. Challenge after challenge, the big man was victorious.

Bertram kept his eye on the brightly clothed stranger, watched as he opened up a long, black case. The man pulled a fine looking lute from its velvet recess and placed it to his chest. He tickled its strings, releasing the sweetest notes anyone had ever heard. All went quiet and the man stopped. He was startled by the silence. "Oh, I didn't think that anyone would mind a bit of music with the festivities."

There were no objections, so the stranger played while the patrons drank. Some began to dance to the jaunty tunes and carried on late into the night.

It was between moonset and sunrise that they began to wish one another a good night, winding down the merriment. But before they could leave, the stranger stepped forth, "Hold on but a minute. I would like to challenge Mighty Jauul."

A round of laughter prompted Bertram to ask, "Ave ye been into the drink this evenin'? Is tha' whatcha really want?" He chucked the man on the shoulder and grinned. But the stranger was unwavering in his request.

"I may not look like much, but people place far too much stock in appearances," the

stranger declared. Bertram found a certain irony in his statement, given the man's flamboyant dress.

"Alright, one more match then," Bertram said, clapping his hands, and the crowd whipped up into frenzy. Money passed about; many scoffed and joked at the stranger's expense.

The combatants clasped hands and placed their elbows firmly on the table. Jauul felt strange about this match, but couldn't figure why. Their gazes locked, and for a moment, the crowd became a quiet swirl of babbling noise.

Jauul shook his head clear, but his face felt flush and sweat beaded upon his brow. The stranger smiled, tipped his head to Jauul, "Good luck and remember the words."

Everyone was nudging their neighbor to pay attention to the match. Jauul looked up, nervous. Bertram, who stood over them, blinked the weariness from his eyes and asked, "You both ready then?" They nodded and Bertram started the match.

Jauul immediately drew the stranger's wrist to within an inch of the table, the man smiled back. Jauul tried as he could, but the man's wrist would not break; again he smiled. The stranger would not succumb. Then slowly, he pushed back. Jauul was bewildered; he could do nothing to stop the stranger's retaliation, his forehead became soaked with sweat and it ran into his face. Gasps and whispers rippled through the crowd; they could scarcely believe it either. The stranger forced his hand against Jauul as he whispered, "…remember the words," so that only Jauul might hear it.

The stranger pushed and Jauul's arm came up and over. Soon, it was Jauul who struggled not to break. The stranger smiled, then slammed Jauul's hand down. Up he stood. The crowd was silent; many mouths hung slack. The stranger went to his case and packed his lute, slung it over his shoulder. Bertram held up the money owed the man and the stranger snatched it on his way out. "You see, friend? Never take anything as you see it, for there is often much more. Name's Andeer, by the way." On the trail of those words, he headed for the door and said, aloud this time, "Remember the words."

He doffed his cap as he whisked out the door. Pointed ears stuck through his tuft of blond hair. The door closed quietly behind him.

"A bloody Elf, one o' them Bards!", Bertram shouted out, "We been bloody cheated! I remember the words, the ones he was singin', magick, the words wuz buried in the song."

Slowly, they all began to realize what they had really heard. The Bard's words rang clear in their heads:

Mountains tower and rain clouds shower
Large men thunder while small men cower
Physical, quizzical, deceptive and smart
The smaller man seeks the larger to thwart

A contest of strength, the ultimate challenge
Here we go, here we go, here we go.

Listen well for I'll say this one time
I'm bigger, I'm stronger
You'll shudder, you'll falter
Your strength it will fail
You must let me prevail

Sleep and then wake
But…Remember the words.

Bertram was in the street looking about, he turned back to the others, "Gone, bloody Bard is gone."

Song of the Mute

By Brenna Hamersley

Cara heard the music begin when she was in the kitchen. With an armful of dishes, she stilled, cocking her head towards the door to better hear.

It was angelic; the harp strummed in perfect harmony, and the melody was so poignant…. And then his voice rose in quiet resonance.

"On the road far before me
Waits a lass so fair and true
With dreams of love and glory
In her eyes so wide and blue"

"Cara!" her mother said sharply, jerking her back to her present task. "Stop dawdling and get those dishes into the sink. We've a full place tonight, thanks to that minstrel—Riordan, was his name?—and the guests are clamoring for their food." Cara nodded and hurried to the sink. Above the clattering of pewter and wood, Riordan's song was drowned out, much to her dismay, but she determined to be quick about her chores so she might be able to enjoy more of the music. *Oh, to be able to sing and make such music…*

Her mother handed her a couple plates of steaming food with directions on which table to bring them, and it was with great anticipation that Cara stepped back into the dining room. Her ears were immediately beset with another verse of Riordan's song, and she smiled happily to herself, walking lightly over to a table. She set down the plates with a smile then trod back to the kitchen door, her skirt swishing with each step. Rather than reentering, she stood still for a moment, watching Riordan across the room.

"Though the long road be my course
I take pleasure in the pain
For before me lays the source
Of all my joy sublime and gain"

Cara caught her breath when his eyes momentarily met hers, and let it out just as swiftly when his gaze continued around the room. How she would love to be singing along with him…. But alas, that could never be. Her hand went to the base of her throat. *This ensured that*, she thought with some bitterness. Once again, tears welled up in her eyes, and she turned back to the kitchen. The guests needed their food, and it wouldn't appear on their tables on its own.

Another verse began as the door shut behind her, and she could vaguely hear it as she took some more plates from her mother. The routine continued for the next fifteen minutes, until her task was finished and her mother allowed her a short break to listen to the last of the song.

"As the moment draws so near
I can see my lady's face
I've been gone many a year
Yet will ne'er forget her grace

"With a kiss I greet her now
Praying ne'er to leave again
I touch with love her handsome brow
To shield her from the coming rain

"Together now we will withstand
All that comes to block our way
We step forth hand in hand
To meet the promise of a new day

"On the road far before me
Lies the end and yet the start
Of dreams of love and glory
With the lady of my heart"

As the last strains of the note held out, she wondered at the choice of words. It was a ditty she had never heard before, so it was possible he had written it himself. *He probably has a lady love somewhere, waiting for him to return to her*, she thought. Raucous applause began, seeming to clash with the quietness of the song, and she looked down, her gaze landing on her hands. Callused, they were, from years of helping out in the tavern. Riordan's lady probably had smooth, beautiful hands. But it was silly to think of such things. She was just a mute tavern maid from a small village; he was a gifted minstrel who would soon find his way to fame and glory in the courts of kings.

She squared her shoulders. So be it, then. She might not be able to sing with words like him, but she would sing a song nonetheless; a song that would last far longer than his presence here.

A smile graced her mouth, and words slowly came into her mind…the words to her song: the song of the mute.

"On the road far before me
Waits the promise of a voice
That can raise above all others
In a song of wondrous choice"

The Old Has Passed Away, and the New Has Come to Stay

By Anna Mittower

The wind raced down the dusty road, tearing at the lonely traveler's clothes. It seemed to be trying to knock him over in its haste to get wherever it was going. The traveler leaned into the wind so as to get his balance, and surveyed the road ahead and the darkening sky. He looked as if the wind might get the better of him and might really blow him away, he was so frail. His ancient face gazed out from under a ragged hood and he clutched his even more ragged cloak around him. His clothes which once were rich clothes were now filled with dust and worn, proving that the clothes were well used. The old man leaned upon his knobby and crooked staff, dragging his feet as he slowly made his way off the road to the shelter of a nearby grove of trees. Sliding off his pack, he sat down out of the wind. Out of this pack he took a lute and cradled it in his arms. The lute looked as old as he and was in disrepair. All of its strings but one were broken off at various lengths and the varnish on it was peeling off. Even so, it gave the feeling that it was well loved and well used.

The traveler looked up at the sound of hoofbeats echoing through the dust. Out of the dust came a young man astride what must have been a white stallion, though now it had a slightly reddish hue because of the dust. They still made a magnificent pair with the fine leather tack that the horse had on and the rich clothes that the young man wore. He sported a rapier at his side, carried, presumably, for defense if needed but mostly for show. The horse and rider were headed for the same grove for a similar purpose, to get out of the wind and dust. The young man dismounted with an energetic leap. Then he seemed startled to see the other there and was curious as to who the old man was. He took his horse's reins and looped them about a small tree. Turning back to the old man, a question formed on his lips. The old man stopped him and wordlessly handed him a sheaf of papers. As the young man read, he realized that this was the song of the minstrel. Not just *a* song that a minstrel would sing but *the* song that captured in its lyrics the essence of the minstrel's being. One thing that puzzled him was that there were no notes or music on the pages, just words. As he kept reading it dawned on him that this was the pledge that minstrels were sworn in with. He felt the old minstrel, for that was what the old man was, tap him on the arm and turn the pages to the very last one. With his crooked finger he pointed out the words of the last verse and indicated that the young man was to read them aloud. The young man looked twice at the minstrel to make sure that he understood him correctly and then began to read the words that the minstrel had pointed out.

"So though I journey far and wide,
I still will keep this song by my side,
Song of old,
Song of gold,
Song of everlasting meaning,
I sing this to pledge me to my minstrel's singing."

The young man paused as he realized the significance of the words he was speaking. The

minstrel gestured for him to continue so he took a deep breath and began again.

"I sing this eternally in my heart, my mind,
And my soul, forever,
And I pledge to keep this song alive,
In the hearts of minstrels far and wide,
Forever."

He finished the verse. The old minstrel look satisfied and turned away. He turned back and in his hands he held his lute, but, wonders of wonders, it was now transformed. It was not old looking or broken any more; now it looked like new and the strings were whole, as if they had never been broken. The young minstrel took it in his hands and he too cradled it, stroking it gently. The old minstrel finally spoke.

"I have kept my pledge to sing this song,
Now I give this song to another,
For him to carry it on,
The old has passed away,
And the new has come to stay."

His speech faded away. The young minstrel turned to thank him for the lute but he was gone. The only thing left was the lute and the sheaf of paper. The young minstrel gazed at the song lyrics again and now understood why there was no music on the pages. He didn't need it. As he read the words he heard and felt the music in his head and in his heart. It was a merry tune that sounded both carefree and powerful, and soft and thunderous, at the same time. It was the song that embodied life itself, truly a song of everlasting meaning. With this realization he fully shouldered the responsibility that had been placed on his shoulders. The wind had died down and the dust had settled now. He remounted his stallion and rode off humming the song which now filled his entire inner being.

Jodhin
By Q. S. Archer

Jodhin knelt in the underbrush, twisting her long hair and pinning it out of reach of the grasping thorns of the eldaberry bushes. She extended her hand for the hearty red berries and carefully plucked them, one-by-one, from their stems, dropping them into the open sack on her lap.

She wondered if her family had any idea of what she was about to do.

She'd been wanting a change and had finally decided to turn that desire into reality. Twenty-three and unwed, Jodhin had been taken in five years ago by Karah and Garet, her sister and brother-in-law, after their parents had died, and when it was clear that no marriage prospects were forthcoming. She'd soon been assigned household chores to earn her keep, and while she didn't mind performing the menial tasks, she didn't see much of a future in them. There were few options open to unmarried peasant women, but most of them seemed better to her than spending the rest of her life scrubbing the same floor.

And so, for the past week, she had been gathering up dried fruit and meat, and once she finished picking enough berries to fill her sack, she was going to start out for Ishsha, the largest town in the district. It was only a two-day walk, and with the food she had collected, and her water skin, Jodhin determined that she had enough supplies to make it to the town and keep herself fed for an extra day or two.

Setting her sack on the forest floor, Jodhin rose to stretch, a smile spreading across her face, one she didn't even try to hide. Having made up her mind and set her plan into motion, she found she could barely contain her excitement.

Once there, she intended to dedicate herself at the Temple into the service of the Goddess. Temple Handmaidens were respected throughout the kingdom of Shansor for the work they did with the needy and abandoned. It was hard work, but it was work that *mattered*. Once she was trained and Dedicated, she could request assignment to any Temple in the kingdom, even the First Temple in Atalar, the capital city of Shansor. If that shouldn't work out, if the priests should refuse to accept her—though Jodhin couldn't imagine why they would—she could always find work as a serving wench in an inn. In either case, it had to be better than staying where she was.

She'd debated whether to tell her family beforehand that she was leaving and had decided against it. She loved her sister, but Karah was emotional and given to fainting. Having witnessed her outbursts before, Jodhin had no desire to be the subject of one of them. She would send a message as soon as she reached the Temple.

Setting her sack on the forest floor, Jodhin rose to stretch, a smile spreading across her face, one she didn't even try to hide. Having made up her mind and set her plan into motion, she found she could barely contain her excitement.

It was at that precise moment that the world around her exploded with—quite literally—a tremendous crash.

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The Writer's Secret Weapon

By Gail Dayton

Someone told me once that a story—any story—is nothing more than a bundle of emotions. I wasn't too sure I believed it then, but the more I think about it, the more I'm sure it is true. Even in fantasy, it's all about the emotion.

Emotions have gone out of fashion in the last century, especially since Hemingway's stoic plots and prose came into fashion. People tend to associate the word "emotion" with "mushy stuff" and forget that anger, fear and excitement are also emotions. Even in the most taut of thrillers, readers want to feel fear over whether the hero will fall from the parapet or anger at the foul deeds of the bad guys. Why? Because that's the reason human beings read stories. We want to experience the emotions along with the characters as they live through the events in the plot. At a safe distance.

This is why your characters are so important, and why critics will complain if a character seems wooden or shallow. Characters suck the reader into the story. They carry the emotions the readers want, and if you get too involved in plot events and neglect your characters' depths, nobody's going to care what happens in your story. You have to give your readers a character they can care about, and then you have to give them those emotions they want.

Many resources exist on developing characters, from character questionnaire charts to psychology books (I'm personally fond of *The Wisdom of the Enneagram* by Hudson and Riso). But there's a difference between "developing" a character and conveying their emotions on the page to the reader.

Once again, it comes down to "show, don't tell." I've noticed a trend toward "cinematic" writing in many of the contests for unpublished writers that I've judged. The focus is on action and dialog with only the occasional brief nod at a character's inner existence. These writers forget that the reason it works in movies is that *actors* do all the hard stuff—the emotions. Actors convey the characters' emotions with their expressions, their body language and their voices. Human beings have been reading faces, bodies and tone of voice for tens of thousands of years longer than we have been reading words. Unfortunately, all we have to work with is words. And our secret weapon.

You *show* emotions by crawling down inside your characters' heads and writing down what they are thinking, how they are feeling when the ogre pops up. Don't stop the action for paragraphs while your characters emote, but don't forget the inside-the-head action as well as that going on outside.

I use samples from my own work because they're easier to find, and nobody will get mad at me for quoting them out of context. In my March release, *The Compass Rose,* during a battle her side is losing, the heroine is given unexpected magic.

> Panicked, Kallista tried to call it back, but the magic refused to answer. Would it kill everything it touched? She looked down at Torchay (her bodyguard) where he knelt by her side, head bent, saw the dark glitter clinging to the burnished red of his hair. She tried to brush it off, and it melted away like the mist it resembled, leaving nothing behind. Not even dampness.

> Torchay turned his face up to hers, his eyes as wide and frightened as she knew her own must be. "What did you just do?"

Small details, but they convey the emotion Kallista is feeling.
On the other side of the battle, one of the enemy soldiers has survived:

> He hurt. All over, but especially his head. And there was dirt in his mouth. And his mouth was too dry to spit. Stone tried anyway. He succeeded in getting rid of some of it. He wiped his hand on his pants and scraped more of the grit off his tongue with his fingers.
>
> Where was he? What had happened? They'd made it through the breach, somehow alive and—*Khralsh*, his head hurt.
>
> Ocean was gone, incinerated by an Adaran witch. He'd taken his partner, Moon, with him. River, Wolf, Snow—too many to name had fallen to arrows or worse. But he and Fox had made it through. He was certain of that.

Here, we're spending more time in Stone's head because he's trying to figure out what happened, but again, there's action interspersed with the thoughts and reaction. You should use a character's actions and words to show his emotion, but often you simply have to write down what he's thinking. And it usually works better if you write it without the distancing phrases like "he wondered--" or "she thought--."

It's also important to use these internal thoughts with dialog, especially when your character is thinking something other than what they're saying:

> General Uskenda nodded and turned her piercing gray glare on Kallista. 'Well, Captain? What exactly did happen? What sort of—' She eyed the blue of Kallista's tunic, '—of *North* magic was that?'
>
> 'I...can't say.' Not because it was a naitani secret, but because she didn't know. However, generals—most of those she'd known—preferred secrets to ignorance.

"Show, don't tell" extends beyond description into character motivation and emotion. Readers want to feel those emotions—even the icky, mushy ones. Emotions are crucial to the development of motivation and conflict. Motivation for almost any action is at its root an emotional one. Why do you think so many action movies begin with the hero's wife/child/friend getting whacked? To rip open the hero's emotions and motivate him to go blow up villains. Without actors to do it for us, we have to use the tools we have. And that sneaky ability to crawl inside our characters' heads and expose what's hidden there is our only real advantage. Don't ignore it; instead, use it wisely.

Gail Dayton has been reading fantasy since she discovered the Red/Blue/Green Fairy Books in the Idaho Falls Public Library when she was in 2nd grade, and writing it almost as long. The Compass Rose is the first book in The One Rose trilogy from Luna Books, released in March. The Barbed Rose will follow sometime in 2006. Visit her at www.gaildayton.com (which she does intend to update really soon).

A Sorcerous Mist

By Simon Kewin

Quirk stood on the quay, stared out to sea and swore. Nothing. A few yards of choppy, green sea, and then the whole world faded away into grey fog.

He could hear ropes creaking in the thick, damp air, men grumbling quietly to themselves, and the hulls of the boats bumping and jostling against the wooden spars of the jetty as if impatient at being tethered for so long. He could taste salt and smell the familiar, sharp tang of fish. But he could see nothing.

For three days now it had sat there. It crept a little inland, washing over the town like a slow flood. It stretched out to sea, all the way to the ends of the world so far as any one knew. And there was nothing to be done about it.

He cursed again. There wasn't a breath of wind on his face whichever way he turned, no suggestion of a breeze to blow the great sea-har away and let them sail. He thought of the cargo of smoked fish in the hold of *Sheerwater*, the weight of all those herring in all those barrels sucking her down into the water as if a sea serpent had hold of her. He dreaded to think what the cold and damp was doing to the fish. And the Western Isles four days' sail away even when the fog did lift.

For three days now it had sat there. It crept a little inland, washing over the town like a slow flood. It stretched out to sea, all the way to the ends of the world so far as any one knew. And there was nothing to be done about it.

He cursed again, but the wind still refused to stir.

Quickly, for perhaps the twentieth time that day, he walked back along the quay, the wood beneath his boots shiny and slippery with water and the crushed remains of fish. He ignored the squat, rounded shapes of the inshore trawlers, their crews listlessly mending nets, caulking hulls, coiling lines. He strode angrily between small towers of barrels that overflowed with salt and the smooth, metallic shapes of fish. He kicked at the nets that had been thrown into rough piles, ready to be checked and folded. Only back at the sleek, lithe lines of *Sheerwater* did he stop. Standing next to her there as she chafed at her moorings, he could barely see up to the top of her mast.

McBride stood at his customary station next to the tiller, watching over the boat, one eye always on the short gangboard that crossed to the quay. As ever when they were in dock, he looked wary, mistrustful of the land they were tethered to. He rarely went ashore. What it was he feared there, this man who feared nothing, Quirk had never yet found out. Some event in his past, or some series of events, quietly haunted him. Something that had happened to him or to those close to him. Whatever it was, whenever he did make one of his rare, lone forays into port, his eyes were as wide and his breathing as laboured as any fish hauled up in a fisherman's nets.

Yet he was a tall, strong man—the strongest man on the boat. His hair was long, lashed into a single sheaf with beautifully-knotted leather thongs. His face was worn and a little raw, like ship's timbers long-exposed to the elements. Here and there it was mottled and pocked,

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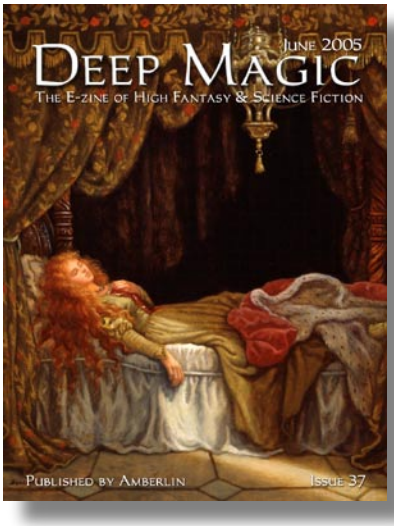
Featured Artist
Ruth Sanderson



Age: 53
Residence: Massachusetts
Marital Status: Married
Children: 2
Hobbies: Horseback Riding
Personal Quote: "I would define a book as a work of magic whence escape all kinds of images to trouble the souls and change the hearts of men." -- Anatole France
Favorite Book or Author: Charles de Lint
Started Painting In: 1964
Artist Most Inspired By: J.W.Waterhouse
Media You Work In: Oils
Schools Attended: Graduate of The Paier College of Art 1974.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Norman Rockwell Museum, Society of Illustrators, Delaware Museum of Art, R. Michelson Gallery in Northampton, MA, misc. other galleries and exhibitions.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: ruth@ruthsanderson.com
Website URL: ruthsanderson.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: Instead of the proverbial silver spoon, I must have been born with a crayon in my hand, because I can't remember a time when I didn't want to draw.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Romantic Realism is probably the closest name for it.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: I have been inspired by stories, by other artists, and by my own inner workings. I have started in the past few years to paint some personal pieces based on the spirit in nature. I have begun a Green Man series based on the months of the year and a female version based on the four seasons. These are subjects that many artists have interpreted, and it's inspiring to try my hand at them as well.

continued on next page

Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)
A: Sleeping Beauty is such a universally known story, this piece speaks for itself. It's all about the play of light on the figure to achieve an evocative mood. Jane Yolen did the retelling, and of course, her words are always inspiring. This painting was done in 1985.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: The English Pre-Raphaelites, the Hudson River School, Howard Pyle, N.C. Wyeth, Norman Rockwell, to name just a few.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: In 2003, I won the Texas Bluebonnet award for my picture book The Golden Mare, the Firebird, and The Magic Ring. This contest for best book of the year was judged by 250,000 Texas school children. I was honored. I did both the retelling and the illustrations.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/ Fantasy genre?
A: I don't really feel qualified to answer that one, though I would like to see more Fantasy and Science Fiction taken as serious literature, and I hope that will become a trend.

Ten Rules for Writing Dialogue and Packing for Fantasy Conventions

By Jeff Wheeler and Brendon Taylor

The month of May has been a full one for the crew of Deep Magic. On May 20-21, we attended our first convention, the Opus Fantasy Arts Festival in Denver, Colorado. The invitation came with the obligation to attend a panel and instruct a writing seminar. The topic that Brendon and I chose was to handle their dialogue workshop. So now we can kill two birds with one stone (obviously we didn't teach the cliché workshop) by writing an article about the experience.

The founders of Deep Magic (Jeremy, Brendon, and Jeff) were joined by two staff members, Nikki and Mark—whom we thank for hanging out with us that weekend. It was a lot of fun, and we met a lot of friendly and often quite frightening people (including, we believe, a true half-orc).

To generate the dialogue workshop, we primarily searched the Writing Craft section of our website for articles that would shed light on the topic. We found so many that we came up with the Ten Rules for Writing Dialogue. Since the deadline for the e-zine is coming fast, we'll be brief and encourage you, as we did our delightful students, to follow the links to the original sources. This is not a David Letterman Top 10 list, so don't expect a punch-line at the end.

Top Ten Rules

Rule #1—Make the characters move

Terry Brooks once said that character movement is essential to good dialogue. Except for watching paint dry, nothing can be more boring than having two characters stop and start talking to each other for long bouts. Movies are full of good examples of how to do this well. For example, we showed a clip from The Empire Strikes Back where Han Solo and Leia were bickering about why Han had to leave. If you have it on DVD, watch that scene again and study the movement of the characters, as well as the movement of those around them. Adding those non-verbal cues will help spice up a dialogue scene.

Source: "Lunch with Terry Brooks" by Jeff Wheeler

Rule #2—Said Bookisms can be naughty

If you do not know what a said bookism is, you'd better read Margo Lerwill's article again. In most cases, it is proper to use the word 'said' as a dialogue tag. Other words (hissed, demanded, cursed, wailed) are getting more and more distracting. Choices like these can be impractical—example, how can someone "smile" a line?—and others are just silly. When writing

modern fiction, you run the risk of pulling a reader out of the story if you use them incorrectly.

Source: "'Said Bookisms,' She Growled" by Margo Lerwill

Rule #3—For Heaven's Sake, Use Proper Grammar!

If you haven't learned why the Geek is called the Geek, then you must read his writing craft article on grammar. Some might prefer undergoing a root canal without meds, but editors constantly suffer reading unedited manuscripts where the basic rules of dialogue punctuation are unknown. Increase the odds of avoiding the slush pile by learning the rules and applying them before you submit to a publisher. Editors will add your name to their nightly prayers if you do.

Source: "Writing Craft #4" by Jeremy Whitted

Rule #4—Be realistic

Let's face it—readers enjoy characters that they can relate to. Whether composing a short story or an epic novel, pick characters that have some intrinsic humanity. If the reader cannot relate to them in some way, they will not engage with the story. Sometimes you have to do a little research to be convincing. If you know nothing about legal matters, then don't write about an attorney until you've done some homework. This will build your credibility as a writer.

Sources: "Say What?" by Ally Wrenn
"Do I Write Funny?" by Steve Westcott
"Ringing True" by Brendon Taylor

Rule #5—Thou Shalt not Infodump

A mistake most new writers make is giving in to the temptation to flood the reader with what seems to be important historical context, when in reality, it just mires down the prose and gets mud on the readers' boots. Resist this temptation. Start with the character. Start at the point in the story where the most drama is about to happen, where the status quo changes irrevocably. Sprinkle in the backstory gradually, teaspoons at a time. Remember, ninety percent of what you know about the world and its history will never be revealed in the story. That's a great rule of thumb.

Source: "Notes on Beginnings: Stay with Scudder"

Rule #6—To Monologue or Not To Monologue? Not!

In the seminar, we showed a clip from the movie The Incredibles when Syndrome begins

to monologue. It's a great reminder that smart villains (or evil overlords in training) should avoid this tendency at all costs. Again, it may be tempting to an author to use this device to explain the motivations behind the villain. Stop being tempted so much! Resist!

Source: "Notes About Villains: For Writers Who May Not Know One" by M. Thomas

Rule #7 - $#!$!%^& is Cheating

Sure, you can read all the modern curse words in various popular authors (George R.R. Martin, Robin Hobb, etc). But we state unequivocally that it's cheating. Don't use words that are already full of modern meaning and context, that pack an emotional punch that any high school student probably hears a hundred times a day. Great writing happens when an author creates a new world, a new culture, and a new set of emotionally charged vocabulary. Whether it is Terry Brooks' "Shades!" from his Shannara world, or my "Ban it!" from Landmoor, investing your world with its own unique way of profaning is, in our opinion, better.

Rule # 8—Ditch the Clichés

There are, perhaps, a limited number of original story ideas in all the wide world, and every story told is a derivation on them (bonus points to the reader who can point us to the source of this thought). The magic comes by creating a new spin on a tried and true theme. Robin Hobb illustrates this very well in an article she did for Deep Magic. Rather than trying to trump her, read it.

Source: "Fantasy and Cliches" by Robin Hobb

Rule #9—Meesa Think Alien Dialects is Mui Mui Bad

Think Jar Jar Binks from the Star Wars franchise. Thank the stars in that far away galaxy that we got to endure him even less in Episode III. Dialects, speech impediments, or slurred words come across better on the screen than in books. Written out, a lisp can be very distracting. It can also be done very well: Think Jack Sparrow in Pirates of the Caribbean. Enough said.

Rule #10—Tension: If You Build it, They will Come

In my view, this is the single most important ingredient to good and memorable dialogue. Tension sells. Tension grips readers. Tension helps us feel. If every character is the quintessential good guy that never steps on anyone's toes or fosters resentment about something, then ratchet it up with some good old-fashioned tension. Tension helps a reader invest in the story. Use it. Liberally. Don't make everyone agree that the end of the world is near. There are naysayers aplenty. Use them.

Source: "Creating Suspense" by Brendon Taylor

It was fun teaching these writing principles in Denver. Really, each one is common sense. Weaving them together is the difficult thing. Does every tavern wench have a unique voice? How much time do you invest on bringing every character on the page alive? It depends on the story you are telling. Hopefully this will be helpful to those budding writers out there.

I should mention Rule #11 though, just to be thorough.

Rule #11—When You Become Famous, Ignore Any/All of These Rules

Places Underground

By Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

Once upon a time, surrounded by thick green trees, and pressed up tight and loving against a tall, cave-riddled mountain, there was a calm blue lake. At the edge of the lake was a village filled with laughing, joyous, busy folk. Some scholars said that they had elven blood in their veins, and some that they were the descendants of wood sprites, while still others claimed that they were the very spirits and majesty of the forest itself.

None of that really matters much, however. What does matter is that in this village, ringed by trees and lake and mountain, there lived a young boy named Gryfin.

Gryfin was different from the rest of his people. Where they were tall and golden haired and lived for sunlight and bright days on the lakeside, Gryfin was smaller, darker, and more enthralled with shadows and cool dank caverns than with the glories of the sun and scenery. Each day, when his chores were finished and the other young folk of the village ran off in search of games of tumbleleaf tag and silverfish splash, Gryfin would work his way around the lake edge to the mountainside and search for new tunnels and caves to explore.

The tales of caverns full of glowing jewels and small, dark goblin folk had never raised feelings of terror or caution in his heart. Instead, they had seemed magical...enticing.

The people of the village laughed at him, though with good humor, since they were a kindly, well-meaning folk. "Gryfin," they'd say, "you aren't one of us...not one of the laughing, dancing lake people. You must be of the goblin kind, with your love for places underground. Someday, if you poke about too far, and delve too deep, the goblins will come for you, and take you back to their gem-studded cities down below."

In that way they teased the boy, gently, lovingly, for as I've said, their intent was never to harm. And perhaps they recognized some truth in their own laughing words, since no one was very surprised when, one day at suppertime, Gryfin did not return with the other village children.

Nor was Gryfin very surprised. He had heard the villagers' warnings and taunts differently than they might have thought. The tales of caverns full of glowing jewels and small, dark goblin folk had never raised feelings of terror or caution in his heart. Instead, they had seemed magical...enticing. And when, that day, he had laid his head down for a short nap in the deepest cavern he'd yet found, it was half in the hope that the goblins truly would come and take him away.

Therefore, when he opened his eyes to a circle of swarthy, ugly faces, lit only by the glimmer of one candle set in a lantern of purest diamond, his first thought was not to run. It was to throw himself into the arms of his squat, tunnel-loving kin.

Somehow the expressions on the goblins' faces were enough to stop him. Stern and cold, so unlike the lively, loving faces of the lakeside folk. There was no welcome here, no kindred waiting for a long lost child. Only a faint curiosity and a greed as hard and stony as the very

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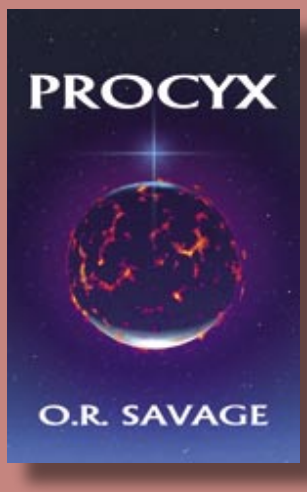

Procyx appeared at the edge of the Galaxy, just as ancient Mhyrnian texts had predicted. To scientists it was a fascinating anomaly, for it seemed to be a star that shone in only one color–a single frequency of pure, blue light. But then nearby worlds began to crumble, spinning into fiery deaths while their suns exploded or smothered out in a dreadful finality called Hypermotility. Humanity's only hope lay in the Vanguards, mythical vessels of irresistible power. Yet it seemed these wondrous ships of light were only myths. Meanwhile, centuries passed. More and more star systems died and nothing could be done to stop the spread of Procyx's cancerous ruin . . . unless the Mhyrnians had an answer for this too . . .

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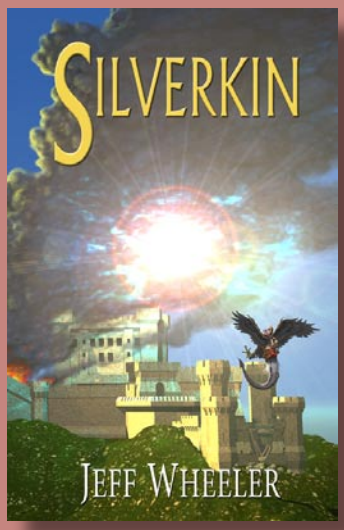

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AMBERLIN BOOKS

Continued from Issue 36

Shadowloom
By Mark Reeder

Chapter Seven

Enion's harbor lay before us. All along its black stone wharves, stevedores loaded and unloaded crates from small sailing ships. Beyond the harbor rose a city of stone and timbers on steep hills. Crowning the tallest one stood the dazzling spires of the palace. It gleamed the color of ice on a sunny day. Mistelwood and Tirach Mir filled in the space behind it. The scene played out like the tapestry in my dream come to life and was a familiar ancient one, though unfamiliar to me in my present amnesiac state. I knew this world was Enion but I recalled nothing of its history or culture. Even so, as I gazed upon this place, satisfaction and great joy at being here again swept through me.

I had asked Morgan about Merlin's Tapestry Worlds during our ride toward Enion. She had described macabre places of horror and dreariness.

"It is hard to believe you are brothers," she said. "All of his worlds are like Thereon—barbaric and dangerous. Enion is a fairy tale haven compared to his violent creations."

A lush wood skirted the searoad; the air was clean; and the water sparkled like gemstones scattered across a carpet of blue velvet. Enion showed none of the grimness I noted in Thereon during my brief visit.

"How long have Merlin and I been Shadow Weavers?" I asked.

"I don't know. Long before I was born; maybe hundreds of years."

"That seems impossible, for someone to live that long."

She shrugged.

"I don't believe you're immortal. But a Shadow Weaver can change the world around him as well as the lives of others, so why can't he change himself? Make himself stronger, faster, bigger; slow the aging process and live for hundreds, even thousands of years."

I don't believe you're immortal. But a Shadow Weaver can change the world around him as well as the lives of others, so why can't he change himself?

If what Morgan said was true, the reasons to control the Ixtlan Shuttle were even greater than I imagined. And even greater reasons existed to keep the knowledge of its disappearance a secret. I fell silent and watched the scenery pass.

Later, we attached ourselves to a group of farmers and merchants bringing goods into the city. Draft horses pulled wagons laden with sweet-smelling fruits and tangy vegetables. A spice merchant's cart trailed pungent aromas, heavily scented with nutmeg and tumeric. Three collies helped a herder keep his sheep moving along the road.

Everyone was well-armed, and they studied the forest and the cliffs keenly as we proceeded toward Enion. Morgan told them her name was Morgiana Skeu, daughter of a rich trader from beyond Tirach Mir. I posed as her servant, guiding the horse and walking in front.

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

Howl's Moving Castle
By Diana Wynne Jones

In fairy tales, the number of children is almost always three and the oldest is almost always the dull, placid, and boring one. Nothing exciting ever happens to the oldest. Sophie Hatter of Market Chipping knows that, for she's the oldest. When her father dies, her stepmother sends her younger sisters out to make exciting lives for themselves, but Sophie stays home and takes over her father's boring life as a hatter.

One day, though, Sophie crosses the Witch of the Waste. What she did to cross the Witch, she doesn't know, but the Witch puts a curse on her, turning her into a 90-year-old crone. And so Sophie, who wanted her own adventure, now has it, but not what she thought she was going to get.

Sophie sets out to find a way to reverse the curse and unexpectedly finds herself the housekeeper for the lecherous Wizard Howl, cleaning his castle whose doors lead onto different lands (including a most bizarre one called 'Wales') and whose exterior is constantly on the move across the land of Ingary.

Also living in Howl's castle are Howl's 15-year-old apprentice, Michael, who is in love with one of Sophie's sisters, although no one is quite sure which one it is, and the fire-demon Calcifer who is bound to Howl via a contract that it is Sophie's mission to discover and fulfill.

Amidst all of this, the King of Ingary has asked Howl to find his missing brother, the Prince Justin, while the Wizard Suliman (also from the strange land of Wales, as is Howl) has also gone missing. And what about the Witch of the Waste, who turns up at inopportune times and has it in for Howl?

Sophie's life is certainly not the boring life that the eldest child of three is supposed to live in a fairy tale.

Diana Wynne Jones has made a career of fantasy novels for 'young adults' that are unexpected, wry, and lots of fun. *Howl's Moving Castle* is one of the best examples of Jones' ability to take fantasy clichés and breathe fresh life into them. By book's end, no one is what you expect them to be and you find that you may not be as much in the 'autopilot' mode as the story unveils itself in unexpected ways.

If you've never read Diana Wynne Jones, I highly recommend *Howl's Moving Castle* as a good starting point. To make the novel even more enticing, Hayao Miyazaki, who won an Oscar for the fantasy animated film 'Spirited Away', has made an animated film of this book which should be released quite soon. (I know there are some sneak previews in the month of June at various film festivals. One of them is the Seattle International Film Festival, where I live. Alas, I was a few seconds late and the show sold out within minutes of going on sale.)

Possible objectionable material: none

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

Deadhouse Gates
By Steven Erikson

The sophomore effect is a well recognized result of telling a large story in serialized segments. In the

continued on next page

first installment there is always the excitement of setting up the story, introducing the characters, creating the tension. In the final installment, if done well, there's the excitement of concluding the story, having the character conflicts (both internal and external) come to resolution, an overall lessening of tension. But what about the middle? Too often, it's merely getting from point A to point B (whether literal or metaphorical) and that's just plain boring. Consider how often you've put aside a book because the middle just dragged. Now expand that to a multi-book series. Authors face quite a challenge to keep the interest alive beyond the first book.

Steven Erikson, in *Deadhouse Gates*, the second volume of his massive *Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen* series, faces that very problem and successfully surmounts it. He not only moves the story forward but he also strengthens and deepens the epic story he's telling. He does this by setting aside most of what he set up in the first book, bringing over only a handful of characters from the introductory volume, and instead focuses on a new storyline that dovetails smoothly into the story already established.

Deadhouse Gates follows Felisin, youngest daughter of the House of Paran, which in *Gardens of the Moon* was thrown from its lofty position. Felisin is now a slave in the horrific Otataral mines and is reduced to prostitution to survive.

Across the Otataral sea, the Seven Cities of the Malazan Empire are still at war, resulting in 30,000 refugees fleeing across the continent. The untried but charismatic commander Coltaine makes it his mission to save these 30,000 refugees (known as the Chain of Dogs) by marching them across the continent while pursued by enemies, to the safety of the holy city of Aren.

One factor in Coltaine's way, however, is the prophesied Whirlwind, an event that will upturn the known world. Leading this Whirlwind is the seer Sha'ik and her followers who will stop at nothing to see their apocalypse realized.

And were this not enough plot threads to try to juggle, Erikson throws in one more: from the first novel, Fiddler and Kalam, two of the fabled Bridgeburners (an elite military squad), have come to the Seven Cities to assassinate the Empress Laseen.

Before novel's end (and this is a massive novel), all of these threads become tangled together and then are skillfully pulled apart and woven into a single tapestry. It is amazing to watch how what at first appears to be four separate novels come together to a satisfying conclusion. This is only the second volume of a long series, so don't expect to find long-term resolution, but the short-term story threads are resolved, making this a satisfying read.

As for writing style, *Deadhouse Gates* is not as elliptically written as *Gardens of the Moon*. The narrative is more straightforward and thus easier to follow. The characterization is as strong as ever. Erikson's skill lies in mastering the art of showing and not telling so that the reader comes to feel for the characters because of their actions rather than because the author told you you should.

One of the downsides is that this is only the second volume of a large series and so there are still thousands upon thousands of pages left before this epic story is fully told. Can Erikson keep interest in the series alive? Only time will tell, but if *Deadhouse Gates* is any indication, he may just be the writer to pull it off.

Possible objectionable material: As mentioned, Felisin survives by being a prostitute, so there are a few suggestive scenes. Also, there is a fair amount of strong and graphic violence throughout the book.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

Mairelon the Magician

By Patricia Wrede

Mairelon the Magician is the story of a street thief named Kim. She poses as a boy and works for hire on the streets of London in the fictional equivalent of the early nineteenth century. Her assignment, at the beginning of the novel, is to break into the wagon of a traveling magician. In doing so, she trips a spell that knocks her over. It is then that she realizes that the magic that Mairelon possesses isn't just sleight of hand—it is real.

continued on next page

Instead of turning her over to the police, Mairelon takes her in as his apprentice, much to the disapproval of his personal servant, the grimfaced Hunch. Kim discovers quickly that Mairelon is wanted by the police himself and he thinks that her talents will come in handy considering the trouble he is in. For the mystical Saltash Set has been stolen, and he has taken the blame for its theft.

The coterie embarks on a journey to discover the location of the remaining pieces of the stolen Set, a piece of which Mairelon has managed to recover already. With Kim's thoughtful observations and lock-picking skills, they began to piece together the clues from the unwitting people they encounter: troublemaking young men masquerading as druid acolytes, noblemen and noblewomen conspiring to possess the stolen Set, and conniving criminals making convincing fakes of the various implements. This ensemble cast comes together in the climax that is part whodunit, part comedy, and sprinkled liberally with magic.

The book is targeted for young readers. The character Kim speaks with a thief's cant that is believable but somewhat difficult to follow at times. The character development is on the shallow side with the majority of the attention given to Kim. Mairelon comes off rather one-dimensionally—an all-wise mentor, unflappable, seeing the answers before anyone else does. Hunch is an interesting character, constantly distrusting Kim and chewing on the ends of his mustache. The other characters, including the villain Dan Laverham, are more clichéd and dull than threatening. The pacing is slow but picks up toward the end as Kim and Mairelon are abducted. But the ending falls flat and strains credibility, for it brings all the cast together at the druid's lodge within minutes of each other. Kim plays the crucial role at the end, as expected, in foiling the villain, but there really is not an emotional payoff that would have made the story more worthwhile. The book has a sequel, *Magician's Ward*.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

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At first, she heard more than saw the great black stallion violently invade the quiet copse in which she worked. But a moment later, as it settled itself, she made out its dark shape among the shadows.

She gasped in dismay.

Atop the stallion was a young man dressed in clothing as black as his mount's coat. He was bent over the pommel of his saddle, and when the stallion nervously sidestepped into a beam of sunlight, she saw numerous arrow shafts protruding from the young man's back. As if in response to a summons, the young man lifted his head, and turned to meet her horrified gaze. His eyes held a pain in them that both drew and repulsed Jodhin. She longed to go to his aid, but the terrified pounding of her heart rooted her feet firmly to the ground. The young man opened his mouth as if to speak, but only a strange, gurgling sound came forth. The light left his eyes and he slumped over, sliding from the saddle to fall in a heap on the forest floor.

Jodhin circled herself with the holiest sign she knew and, gathering her courage, took a tentative step forward.

Lady.

At the sound of the strange, masculine voice in her head, Jodhin recoiled as though she'd been stung. Circling herself once more, she fell to her knees, trembling.

Holy Mother, defend me from evil—

Lady, the voice repeated, interrupting her incantation. ***Jodhin.***

She looked to her left, though for the life of her she couldn't tell why her eyes were drawn in that direction. There was nothing there but underbrush—

The thought hadn't time to fully form in her mind when an enormous black cat with soft, rounded ears and a long tail crawled out from the dark shadows of the brush. She gasped and scrambled backwards, but before she could bolt, he spoke again.

Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you. He began to purr, a low, soothing sound that seemed remarkably out of place at that moment. ***My name is Alcuin. I am a Guardian. My Defender, Daran, as you see, lies slain.***

Jodhin drew in a soft breath of recognition and tried to calm the pounding of her heart. "Of course," she whispered, more to herself than to the creature before her. "I should have known." If the stallion's distinctive black-and-silver tack hadn't enlightened her, the large cat, with his striking silver eyes, should have.

Jodhin had never seen her kingdom's protectors before. They did not often visit her small village, and on those occasions when they had, Jodhin had always been in the fields or the forest, and had missed their coming. Guardians and their Defenders had always fascinated her, especially the cats. It was said they were the avatars of the Goddess Herself, given by Her to protect Her people and administer justice. They had the ability to control the Elements, a Talent they passed on to their Defenders. Guardians lived in Talithia, a part of the kingdom on the northern border where the Defenders were schooled and trained to serve the kingdom. All the stories Jodhin had heard seemed to indicate that Defenders led very exciting lives. She couldn't help but be curious about them, and if she was completely honest, a little envious as well.

But staring at the fallen form of Daran, it did not seem so exciting a life to her now.

She turned her gaze back to Alcuin. "What happened to you?"

We were ambushed, Alcuin replied. He inched closer to her on his stomach, and Jodhin could see arrow shafts protruding from his body as well.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed, moving to his side.

I am dead, he stated flatly. ***My Bonded has gone to the Nine Realms, and it will not***

be long before I join him there.

"But . . . your wounds . . . they do not appear mortal," Jodhin protested. She started to rise—she could fetch the herbalist from the village and be back in no time—but Alcuin shook his head, arresting her in mid-motion.

There is no medicine that can heal a broken Bond, Alcuin said, ***and it is past my time to join him.***

Sinking back to the forest floor, Jodhin could not stop the tears from filling her eyes. "Then why do you remain?"

Because, I— He abruptly cut himself off, lifting his head and looking over Jodhin's shoulder, past the stallion, past the body of his Defender, past, it seemed, the forest itself.

Jodhin turned her head to follow his gaze, but she saw nothing. "What is it?" she asked, turning back to him.

They're coming, he replied.

They? she thought. She looked back over her shoulder, but still saw nothing. She was about to turn back to Alcuin when she heard the faint cry of horse and man alike, and felt the distant thunder of hooves in the earth beneath her.

"Who are they?" she asked.

Baron Sedric's men, Alcuin answered.

Baron Sedric was the representative to the Council of King Leyon for the southwest district of Shansor, and a man, Jodhin had heard rumored, who was not to be trifled with.

"What happened?" Jodhin asked, turning back to the wounded Guardian.

There is no time to talk now, he replied. ***You must hurry! Quickly! Go to the horse and take out the scroll you will find in the nearest saddlebag.***

Jodhin did not hesitate. Stumbling on her long skirt, she rose and dashed over to the stallion. Opening the nearest saddlebag, she found the promised scroll and returned to her place by Alcuin's side.

We must retreat as far back into the brush as possible, he stated, and with great effort, he rose and began to make his way into the security of the dark shadows. ***Follow me and bring your bag.***

Jodhin quickly grabbed her sack and followed Alcuin into the underbrush. She gasped as the thorns bit into her flesh. Ignoring the pain as best as possible, she curled up next to Alciun.

"What's happening?" she whispered.

Hush! he admonished. He paused for a moment, his entire body stiff with expectation. ***We Guardians have long since suspected that Sedric was behind the attempt to assassinate Leyon two years ago***, Alcuin said, ***but we did not have proof until last week. Daran and I have been on the run ever since then, trying to get to the Temple in Ishsha.***

"Because of the Portal?" Jodhin ventured hesitantly. She'd heard of them, those invisible gateways of the Guardians and Defenders that led from the Temple in Talithia to the Temples in the largest towns and cities in Shansor. The system of Portals made it possible for the Guardians and Defenders to move quickly to an area of the kingdom where they were needed most. Just this past spring, there had been a flood in her district, and because of the Portal in Ishsha, the Water Guardians and their Defenders had been able to contain the waters and keep them from washing away a neighboring village.

Yes, Alcuin confirmed. ***We had more than enough lead time on Sedric's men. They should never have caught up to us, unless—*** He broke off, staring through the underbrush to the trees beyond.

"Unless *what*?" Jodhin urged, her voice a scant whisper, but sharp with fear.

At that moment there was a thunderous crash in the forest, and it seemed an entire army was invading their little copse. Daran's stallion reared at the sight of the other horses, screaming an alarm.

Unless Sedric was using magic, Alcuin finished. ***Do not speak again. They will hear you.***

Magic? she thought. But there wasn't any magic in Shansor. The priests themselves had sworn to that fact. But she felt a chill run down her spine, in spite of her self-assurance.

Daran's stallion screamed again, and all but one of Baron Sedric's men dismounted. Two went immediately to Daran's body, and four to his stallion, restraining him. The rest drew their swords, watching the forest expectantly.

Jodhin heard the ripping of cloth and buried her face in Alcuin's soft fur, unable to bear the sight of the men's callous—and thorough—search of Daran's body. For a long moment, she heard only the whicker of horses and the muffled stamp of hooves on the forest floor.

"It's not here," came a call, and she looked up to see one of the men near Daran drop the tatters of his Defender uniform on his body.

"Damn," muttered the man still on horseback. He looked over to the men who were by the stallion. Three were restraining the horse while the other was busy emptying out the saddle bags, and even untacking the horse and looking under the saddle blanket. "Well?" he demanded harshly.

The man threw the bags on the ground. "Nothing," he reported. "The scroll's not here."

At the mention of the scroll, Jodhin's heart jumped to her throat. She felt like it would pound out of her chest, and tried to keep from shifting nervously.

Calm, Alcuin spoke to her. ***They will leave soon.***

"Dammit!" the man raged, pounding one gloved fist on the pommel of his saddle.

"That bloody cat's got it, milord," one of the men suggested.

"And headed straight for Ishsha," he replied. "Mount up!"

The men who were standing guard sheathed their swords and proceeded to obey the command.

"Milord," called one of the men by the stallion. "What if the cat's still around?"

The man on horseback—presumably their leader, Jodhin reasoned—snorted derisively. "Doing what?" he asked. "Waiting to chase *us* to Ishsha?" He grasped his reins. "We've wasted enough time here! The cat's wounded. We may still be able to catch him if we hurry."

"Shall we take the horse with us?" asked another man.

"And risk being seen with it?" the leader countered. "How would we explain ourselves, since there's no Defender riding it?" He shook his head. "Leave it with the body. By the time someone finds them, we'll be long gone. Now mount up and move out!"

It was just as well that the leader had ordered the horse to be left, because as soon as the three men let go of him, he reared and lashed out with his hooves. The men who had been holding him quickly backed away, stumbling in their haste to reach their own horses. They mounted, and with one tremendous motion, the band of men left as quickly as they'd come.

Jodhin didn't move, not even after they'd left the forest. She merely took slow, deep breaths to calm her racing heart, and waited for Alcuin to break the silence.

After a long moment, he stirred. ***They're gone,*** he said. ***It's safe for you to move now.***

Jodhin crawled out from under the thorny brush, still holding the scroll in her hand. Brushing herself off, she looked down at it uncertainly, and then back at the Guardian.

"What...what will you do now?"

I have not the strength to make it to Ishsha, he replied. ***Even if my Bond were not broken, I have lost much strength because of my wounds.***

"But—" Jodhin looked at the scroll again. "How will you get this to the King?"

You must take it, Alcuin stated.

"Me?" Jodhin squeaked. "Go to *Atalar*? But I can't!" She should already be on her way to Ishsha by now.

Jodhin, there is no one else, Alcuin returned. ***Sedric plans another assassination attempt against Leyon by month's end. You must go to the Palace, and you must go now. This scroll is the only proof we have and there is no time to lose.*** His silver eyes captured hers. ***Promise me that you will do this.***

Jodhin opened her mouth to protest once more.

"I promise," she heard herself say.

Thank you, he replied, blinking wearily.

By all the holy Realms of heaven, she thought, *what have I just done?*

She turned to look at the stallion. She knew very little of equitation—very little of *anything* beyond her simple village life. She was fairly certain she could make the transition from her village to a town like Ishsha without too many problems, but a great city like Atalar? Perhaps it would be easier just to go home and leave this problem in the hands of her brother-in-law. She turned back to Alcuin to suggest that very thing—

And noticed his limp form and lifeless eyes.

With a sigh, she turned back to the stallion and proceeded to gather the contents of his saddlebags and put them back where they belonged. It was one thing to desire a more exciting life. It was quite another to have it thrust upon you without so much as a by-your-leave. As Jodhin placed the final item in the last saddlebag, she was seized with the sudden desire to put the scroll back in the bag and walk away. Just take her sack and go to Ishsha like she planned and forget that any of this had ever happened to her. Oh, she would go back to the village and tell some tale about finding the bodies of a Defender and his Guardian in the forest so that the men of the village would come and give them a decent burial. She could even lead the horse home and make sure Garet would "happen" to look in the saddlebags and discover the scroll. He could read—surely he would know it for what it was. And then he and the other village leaders would take care of the matter while she quietly slipped away to Ishsha.

A sudden thought intruded into Jodhin's mind, interrupting her musing. She drew in a sharp breath in response.

As one of the village leaders, Garet had met Baron Sedric on Sedric's last tour of the district, and spoken quite highly of him. Jodhin had heard Garet claim that Sedric had mentioned the possibility of obtaining for Garet an appointment of some sort in Atalar. Garet would undoubtedly bring the scroll straight to Sedric.

Perhaps her plan was not as good as she'd thought.

With a heavy sigh, she set about re-saddling the horse. "You just had to pick my forest, didn't you?" He merely whickered in response.

As she tightened the stallion's girth, her eyes fell on the still form of Daran. Sedric's men had been more than callous; they'd been brutal. She turned her head away, unable to bear the sight. And she knew at that moment she really didn't have a choice in the matter. She'd given her word to an avatar of the Goddess. Had she really thought she could just ignore that and expect to be accepted as Her Handmaiden?

With a heavy sigh of resignation, Jodhin rested her forehead against the saddle. *Very well, then,* she thought. To Atalar she would go. When it was all over, she could always offer herself at the Temple there.

Tucking the scroll inside her bodice, she straightened herself and grasped the stallion's reins. "It looks like we're going on a journey, my boy."

The stallion tossed his head in reply, and Jodhin felt her heart beat fast. While she knew enough about equitation to keep herself a-saddle, she'd never ridden a stallion before. The only horses she was permitted to ride were an old plow mare and a gelding, both of which had to be goaded into any gait faster than a trot. Jodhin swallowed hard as the horse before her stamped impatiently, as though he sensed the urgency of their mission and wanted to be off as soon as possible. Placing her sack of provisions inside one of the saddlebags, she secured the saddlebags to the skirting, and then led the stallion over to a large rock. Adjusting the stirrups, she climbed atop the rock and mounted as carefully as she could. Thankfully, her skirts were full, and did not restrict her from riding astride.

Grasping the reins and taking a deep breath, Jodhin tightened her grip with her knees and touched her heels to the stallion's flanks. She half-expected him to break into an immediate gallop, so when he started to walk forward, Jodhin let out a shaky, relieved breath, and directed him to the worn path that led out of the forest.

Once at the edge of the forest, Jodhin pulled the stallion to a halt and bit her lower lip. The path in front of her split into separate ways. The left fork would take her to her village, while the right fork would lead her to the Road, which would take her to Atalar.

She needed supplies. While Daran's saddlebags were well-stocked with jerky and dried-fruit-and-nut cakes, even with her own meager additions, there was certainly not enough for the ten-day journey to Atalar. And yet, if she showed up in the village on a Defender stallion, she'd never be allowed to leave with him.

A glint of light caught her eye, and she glanced down at her right hand where a ring of gold circled her first finger. It was a gift from her parents, given on the fifteenth anniversary of her naming day. Perhaps she could trade it for food. Glancing once more toward her village, she bit her lip again. She would have to decide. She couldn't just sit there all day.

Turning the stallion down the right fork, she kicked him into a canter and did not look back.

* * *

Stiff and sore, Jodhin gingerly lowered herself from her saddle to the ground. Even after three days of riding, her inner thigh muscles *still* ached, and she found herself moving with an awkwardness she'd never before experienced.

Patting the stallion on his neck, Jodhin grasped his reins and led him to the stream that ran through the small meadow and surrounding woods in which she had stopped. Wincing with each step, she slowed her descent toward the stream. It hurt more walking *down* a hill than it did walking up, and she could only hope that her body would soon grow used to this new discipline.

Spying a raspberry bush, Jodhin filled her apron with the ripe berries while the stallion, whom she had christened Icshar, proceeded to drink his fill. Jodhin filled her goatskin with water and drank her own fill of the refreshing liquid. She filled the skin once more before leading Icshar back up the hill.

Glancing to the western sky, Jodhin decided to make camp for the night. The sun had already set, bathing the meadow and trees in a dusky pink glow. The half-moon had risen around noon, and was overhead. While she could have continued traveling for several hours more, she was exhausted, and wanted only to rest.

Taking advantage of the remaining daylight, Jodhin left Icshar to graze on the lush grasses of the meadow, and trod into the woods, away from the open meadow and Road, searching for a clearing in which to set up camp. While she hadn't seen another soul on the Road since late afternoon, Jodhin was unwilling to take any chances. Having already received several suspicious stares from those she passed on the Road, she preferred to remain out of sight as much as she could. Only Defenders rode the black horses that bore their name, leaving little explanation for why a peasant woman in a dress was atop one of their stallions, especially when there was no Guardian in sight. It was best, then, just to be as inconspicuous as possible.

Finding a small clearing, she untied her apron, and laid it aside, careful not to crush the berries. Clearing a patch of earth, she dug a hole and filled it with dry twigs. She then gathered some evergreen boughs and proceeded to lay something of a soft foundation for her bedroll.

Gathering her apron, Jodhin returned to the meadow. Retrieving a portion of the jerky from Icshar's saddlebags, she settled down near the stallion to eat her own dinner. While he'd been following her around like a puppy dog so far, she didn't want to risk having him wander, especially as darkness was beginning to settle. She ate her jerky and berries, and watched Icshar graze. She would somehow need to get him some feed, especially if they were going to continue traveling all day, every day. She twisted the scrap of gold on her first finger. Perhaps she could find someone willing to barter for grain, or even some old legumes. She'd also found a few loose coins in the bottom of the saddlebags that would suffice to purchase for herself some day-old bread and perhaps some more jerky. Still, she was going to have to ration her food supply.

Finishing her jerky, Jodhin decided to save the remaining berries for her morning meal. Groaning on account of her sore muscles, she rose to her feet and whistled for Icshar. He raised his head and, a moment later, followed her into the woods.

Once they reached the clearing, Jodhin tied his reins to a low branch and unsaddled him. Resting the saddle and saddlebags on some branches, she gave him a quick grooming.

She then fetched the flint and steel from one of the saddlebags and set about starting a small fire in the tinder she had earlier laid. Early autumn evenings were chilly, even in the southern part of the kingdom. Furthermore, many animals who would slumber for the winter were nocturnal, and were hunting as much as possible before their long sleep. Her journey itself was a risk, and she had no desire to compound the possibility of peril by being unnecessarily foolish.

She piled onto the flames enough wood to keep it burning until dawn, and then spread her bedroll on the evergreen boughs. Wrapping herself in her cloak, Jodhin laid down on the bedroll. She stretched her sore, tired muscles, and—

The dawnbirds in the trees above were announcing the start of a new day.

"Goddess above," Jodhin groaned. "Is it morning already?" She felt as though she could sleep for a whole week. "Must be getting old," she muttered.

She was getting no closer to Atalar just lying there, however, and Icshar was nervously prancing in place.

"Hungry, are you?" she asked, rising from her bedroll.

The fire had burned down to embers, and Jodhin covered the red coals with dirt, stamping

down on them for good measure. The countryside had suffered enough from the floods the past year. The last thing it needed was a wildfire.

She then set to caring for Icshar, saddling him and securing the bags and bedroll. It was not an easy task, however, as he seemed intent on freeing his reins from the branch as soon as possible.

"Be still!" she commanded, trying to tie the bedroll to the skirting. But Icshar was more than nervous—he was terrified, she realized, as she noticed his flattened ears and the whites of his eyes. Her annoyance immediately melted away into concern and she untied his reins.

He immediately reared, screaming a challenge to the air.

Jodhin looked around herself. There was nothing in sight. Nothing even moved, except for the trees.

Jodhin suddenly stopped her search for an intruder, staring instead at the treetops above. *Odd*, she thought. They were bending and swaying as if caught in a wind, but there wasn't even the slightest hint of a breeze.

A tickling sensation on her wrist brought her attention back from the sky, and she glanced down to find that a branch was proceeding to coil itself around her arm. With a scream to rival Icshar's, she yanked herself away from its grasp and threw the bedroll at it. Undeterred, it continued to reach for her.

It was then that she noticed that *all* the trees in the woods seemed intent on seizing both her and Icshar. With a surge of terror, she threw herself into the saddle. Icshar needed no goading to move, and she was barely astride before he bolted for the meadow. Jodhin tightened her grip with her knees and held on to the reins and pommel for dear life with one hand and did her best to keep the branches away with the other. Daran had had a sword, sheathed and strapped to Icshar's side, but even if she'd had the presence of mind to think of it, Jodhin hadn't the skill to lean down and draw the sword while Icshar was galloping.

The trees seemed intent on capturing their prey, bending as one to impede their passage. She leaned as low over the saddle as she could, but branches still scored her face and arms, ripping through her hair and tugging at her cloak and skirt. They even tried to entwine themselves in Icshar's mane and tail. Undaunted, he drove through them.

Jodhin could see the meadow just ahead. There were still a few trees remaining to push through, but the sight of their goal only bolstered her determination. She kicked Icshar's sides, and he responded with new speed. A branch reached for them, tangling itself in Icshar's reins. Jodhin immediately lashed out, hitting the branch so hard with her fist it broke, falling helplessly to the ground. Another embedded itself in Icshar's tail, but with a scream of mingled pain and triumph, he broke free of it, bursting into the open space of the meadow.

Once free, Jodhin glanced behind herself to see the trees swaying in impotent fury. Icshar seemed to have no intention of slowing, however, and Jodhin could only guide him to the Road. Making sure the scroll was still safely tucked inside her bodice, Jodhin settled into the saddle.

Icshar continued at a gallop, the pounding of his hooves matching time with the beating of her heart. Only when they were well out of sight of the wooded area was Jodhin able to slow him into a canter, and he continued in this for some time before he would respond to further commands to slacken his pace.

Jodhin did not mind. He was the one who had sensed the trees in the first place, and she was perfectly happy to let him decide when they were far enough away to be safe, as much as a horse *could* decide such a thing. But he clearly had more of a sense for whatever it was that had happened to them than she did, and she was quite willing to trust that sense.

By midday, however, they were both in need of a rest. The emotion of the morning had ebbed away, and the scratches she'd barely felt before, now throbbed painfully. The rolling hills through which the Road wound itself boasted a pond just a short distance off the Road. There were, thankfully, few trees scattered on the hills, and none near the banks of the pond.

Jodhin turned Icshar off the Road, and he trotted through the grasses to the pond. She dismounted and searched through the saddlebags for a tin of salve she was certain she'd seen before. Finding it, she tossed it on the ground and then started hunting for her jerky. In the panic of the morning, she had been so careless in fastening the saddlebags to the skirting, she was surprised they had all stayed attached. Spying the dried meat, she counted up what remained. She had used up about half of her supply, and given that the events of the morning had rendered her unable to eat breakfast, she was quite hungry. Icshar had already set about feeding himself, and Jodhin followed his example. Taking two pieces of jerky and a fruit-and-nut cake from the saddlebags, she gathered up the tin of salve and settled herself on the southern bank of the pond and mentally added up the losses she'd sustained that morning.

She didn't really mind the loss of her apron, but she keenly felt the loss of the fruit. She couldn't afford to be careless with food, even with something as simple as raspberries. The bedroll, however—that was simply unfortunate. It had been her one comfort, but there was nothing to be done.

There was a small stream running into the pond, and, finishing her meal, she washed her hands in the stream. She pushed up the shredded sleeves of her chemise, examining the scratches on her arms. They were ugly and red. Some were even caked with dried blood. She washed them clean and reached for the tin of salve. Opening it, she sniffed the salve carefully. It smelled like the kind the herbalist would make for scrapes and minor cuts or insect bites. Deeming it safe, she dabbed her scratches with ointment and carefully rubbed it in. She pulled her sleeves back down. They were torn beyond repair, but they were better than nothing.

She then rose and went over to examine Icshar. It was difficult to find the scratches against his black coat and skin, but those she did discover, she treated with the salve. He was so intent on his grazing, he didn't even twitch as she ministered to his wounds. She had to get him some feed soon, and could only pray that they would reach a town or a large village in the next day or so. The ones she'd passed so far weren't large enough to claim so much as a tavern.

Finished with her ministrations, she returned the salve to its saddlebag and settled under a tree to watch Icshar until he finished grazing. The events and emotions of the morning took more of a toll upon her than she'd anticipated, for it was not long before her soon-heavy eyelids dragged her down into sleep.

* * *

Who are you?

The strange male voice invaded Jodhin's dreams, dispersing them as the sun dispersed the early morning mists that clung to the lake near her village. For a moment, she thought she was back in her village, until—

Who. Are. You.

The demanding voice inside her head drew her fully awake, and she opened her eyes to see the imposing form of a Guardian standing over her. She sat up with a start.

"By the Blessed Embrace! Am I ever glad to see you!"

She suddenly remembered that she'd been watching Icshar graze, and she scrambled to

her feet, her heart pounding with the dread fear of having lost him. But spying him on the other side of the pond, she relaxed, and whistled for him. He broke into an obedient trot.

Smiling, she turned back to the Guardian. "I thought he might have wandered away." It was then that she noticed that the Guardian was alone. "Where is your Defender?" She looked around, hoping to see one of the black-clad protectors. She wanted nothing more than to turn the whole matter over to someone who knew what to do, but there wasn't another soul to be seen.

I will not ask you again, the Guardian replied, ignoring her question. ***Who* are *you, and what are you doing with a Defender stallion?***

Jodhin's smile faded as she caught the hard, dangerous tone of the Guardian's voice. "I—my name is Jodhin," she replied in a small, subdued tone. "I'm on my way to Atalar to deliver a message to the king."

You're a peasant, the Guardian replied, his mindvoice nearly a sneer. ***What possible message could you bring to the king that would be of any value?***

Jodhin blinked and opened her mouth to reply, but no words were forthcoming. Was this creature before her truly a Guardian? Everything she had ever heard of Guardians declared them to be noble and just, indifferent to social rank. The vast majority of Defenders were not of the nobility. Alcuin certainly hadn't looked down on her for being a peasant.

Well? the Guardian demanded. ***What is it? Or did you just steal the horse?***

"I did no such thing!" Jodhin snapped, his accusation shaking her from her stupor. "Alcuin made me promise!"

The Guardian's golden eyes widened in feline interest. ***You know Alcuin?***

"I did," she replied softly. "He's dead." She related the events surrounding Alcuin's death, and the content of the message she was to deliver. She then proceeded to tell him of the events of that morning, hoping he could tell her what had happened.

Don't you recognize magic when you see it? the Guardian asked with derision.

"No, as a matter of fact, I *don't*!" Jodhin replied. She pulled herself up into Icshar's saddle, heartily sick of the Guardian's condescension. She'd lost enough time by her slumber, and she'd be damned if she let this cat continue to hold her up. She'd wanted to ask him for his help, but it wasn't worth it if *this* was the price she had to pay.

Where are you going? the Guardian asked. He sounded surprised that she was leaving.

"To Atalar," she replied. "I've wasted enough time here." She kicked Icshar into a canter.

The Guardian came alongside her, easily keeping pace with the stallion. ***Alone? You can't even defend yourself.***

"I've been alone so far and I'm fine," Jodhin replied.

The Guardian snorted. ***If you think Sedric won't try to attack you again, you're a fool.***

Jodhin pulled Icshar to an abrupt stop and glared down at the cat. "What do you suggest I do?" she asked irritably. "Go home?"

Get help, the Guardian answered.

Jodhin resisted the urge to reach down and strangle him. "I'm doing the best I can!" she shouted. "Do you think I *want* to do this? Do you think I *like* being out here alone?" She shook her head in disgust. "The only person I would trust would be a Defender or a Guardian, and I haven't seen any of them on the Road." She kicked Icshar back into a canter.

And just what do I look like? came the contentious reply.

"If criticism is your idea of help, then I don't need it," she snapped back. "Just go back where you came from. I'm better off by myself than with you." She brushed a strand of hair out

of her eyes. "Better yet, call for help. Don't you have a Defender?"

Not all Guardians are Bonded, the cat snarled.

"But unBonded Guardians don't usually leave Talithia," Jodhin countered. "At least, not without a good reason. Everyone knows that."

The Guardian didn't reply.

"Look," Jodhin said, "if you're so worried about me, why don't you just call for help? Then you can leave and go back to doing whatever it is you're out here for."

I can't call for help, so you're stuck with me, the Guardian replied.

"Well, aren't I just Goddess-blest?" she murmured under her breath. Of all the Guardians she could have encountered, it *would* be her luck to meet the black sheep of the herd, as it were.

I heard that.

Jodhin resisted the urge to retort. In spite of the Guardian's surliness, however, Jodhin felt a little safer having him nearby. But still, he didn't seem too happy about it. "Why are you doing this?" she asked. Under normal circumstances, she would never have voiced the question. Guardians—with or without Defenders—protected the kingdom. It was a given, and under normal circumstances, no Guardian or Defender would have thought twice about helping. They would simply have been doing their duty. But this Guardian didn't seem normal, as she understood the concept of "normal" Guardians.

Do you want help or not? he snapped.

Jodhin opened her mouth, but closed it without replying. Of course she wanted help. Only a fool would turn down assistance in her situation. But given this Guardian's testy nature, Jodhin decided not to antagonize him by pressing the issue, or by asking him why he seemed so different from others of his kind, at least, not now. And since she *was* stuck with him… "Do you have a name?" she asked.

Orin, he replied.

Orin. It was the Shansorian word for "brave." After this morning, Jodhin knew she could use all the bravery she could get, even if it wasn't her own.

* * *

Grooming Icshar that evening, Jodhin could begin to feel his ribs as she brushed.

He needs some real food.

The unexpected comment in her mind made her visibly jump, and set her already-strained nerves on edge. She turned to find Orin lying in the grass, watching her. "Yes, well, so do I," she snapped, "but there isn't any." Almost immediately, she regretted her loss of control. Bickering with Orin served no productive purpose and she'd promised herself earlier that day that she wouldn't let him draw her into any more petty arguments. With a heavy sigh, she rested her forehead against Icshar's withers. "I'm sorry. But as I said, I'm doing the best I can." When she turned back to the Guardian after receiving no reply, however, she saw that he was gone.

Just as well, she thought. *I don't have the energy to argue tonight.*

She finished grooming Icshar and turned him loose to graze. If they didn't happen upon a large town by noon tomorrow, Jodhin determined to stop at the first farm she found and barter for grain. Icshar just couldn't continue on like this.

Sighing once more, Jodhin turned to tend the fire, adding a few more sticks to the flames. Satisfied that it wouldn't go out, she rifled through the saddlebags for some jerky and a fruit-and-nut cake. Before she had found either, however, she heard a soft *thud* on the ground behind

her. She turned to see Orin standing over two freshly-killed rabbits.

I thought you might be hungry.

His image was suddenly blurred, and Jodhin brushed away the tears that had sprung to her eyes. "Thank you," she said softly.

I can get more if you want them, Orin stated.

Jodhin shook her head. "These are plenty." She stared at the fresh meat, her mouth already beginning to water. A sudden thought struck her, and she looked back up at Orin. "What will you eat?"

I'm going back out to hunt. I'll be back later, he answered. Without waiting for a response, he turned and headed back out into the deepening darkness.

Retrieving Daran's dagger from one of the saddlebags, Jodhin dressed the rabbits, skewered them, and set them over the fire to cook.

She hadn't realized just how hungry she was for fresh food until she smelled the meat cooking. She nearly couldn't wait until it was finished, and she burned her fingers and tongue in her haste to eat it. Jodhin consumed both rabbits, cleaned up, and then settled down with a needle and thread that she retrieved from one of Icshar's saddlebags. After her experience of the morning, she realized that it wasn't safe to simply tuck the scroll into her bodice.

Ripping off a long shred of her chemise sleeve, Jodhin rolled the scroll in the material and sewed it shut. She then securely sewed the scroll in her bodice, tugging at it to make sure that it would not move.

What does it say?

Jodhin visibly jumped at the unexpected sound of Orin's voice in her head, and she looked up to see him settling himself on the other side of the fire.

What does the scroll say? he repeated.

"I don't know," she replied, sewing in a few more stitches for good measure.

Didn't you open it?

"No," she replied, reaching for Daran's dagger. "It didn't seem my place to do so." She cut the thread and tucked the needle into a small piece of cloth so as not to lose it. "Not that it matters," she continued, glancing up at Orin. "I can't read anyway."

Jodhin returned the needle and thread to Icshar's saddlebag, expecting him to make his usual comment of derision. Surprisingly, however, he remained silent.

Perhaps traveling with him wouldn't be so bad.

* * *

"You're a Fire Guardian, aren't you?" Jodhin asked, bending over the wood she had gathered for the evening fire. There had been a drizzling rain all day, and it had only let up in late afternoon. Her cloak had soon dried, but the grass and woods were still damp, and she was finding it difficult to light a fire. "Would you come over and light this?"

There was a long pause—long enough so that Jodhin looked up from her work, expecting to find the Guardian had gone on a hunt. But he was still sitting there, staring at her with an indiscernible expression in his golden eyes.

"Orin?"

I—I can't, he replied.

"*Aren't* you a Fire Guardian?" Jodhin asked, frowning in puzzlement. She was certain that it was the Fire Guardians who had golden eyes.

Yes, he answered, somewhat reluctantly.

"Guardians *do* control the Elements, don't they?"

Yes, came the slow reply.

Jodhin frowned again. "Then why—"

I just can't! Orin exploded, abruptly turning and stalking away.

Jodhin could only stare at his retreating form until it disappeared into the darkness. Her first response was indignation, but there was none of the usual belligerence or condescension in Orin's tone. There was something more, something painful there that checked Jodhin's exasperation. First the issue with calling for help, and now this. She bit her lower lip in concern, but there was little she could do. She turned her attention back to the damp wood.

Both she and Icshar had finished their meals by the time she saw Orin emerging from the shadows. Earlier that day, they'd come across a farm and had obtained some grain for Icshar. Jodhin had tried to offer her gold ring in exchange, but the farmer wouldn't hear of it. His daughter was a Defender, and he refused to take payment from Jodhin "or any other Defender or Guardian in need of help," he'd said as he attached the bags of grain to Icshar's saddle. Jodhin had merely smiled her thanks, and hadn't bothered to correct him.

Without a word, Orin settled himself on the other side of the fire from Jodhin. There was a heavy silence between them, one that Jodhin could not long bear.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

About what? came the quick reply in a low, snarling tone.

Jodhin was not dismayed, however. "Whatever it was that happened that's keeping you from talking to other Guardians or controlling your Element," she replied.

No.

"Isolating yourself won't help," she pointed out.

What do you know of it? he snapped. ***What do you know of anything?***

"Fine, then!" she retorted, not even trying to hide her exasperation. "Wallow in your misery by yourself!" With that, she turned her back on him, curling up in her cloak and settling down for the night.

* * *

Wake up.

Orin's voice invaded her sleep, but she merely turned over and pulled her cloak over her head. It was far too early, and she had no interest in talking to him. A moment later, she felt a shove in her back.

Wake* up*!

With an exasperated sigh, she threw off her cloak and sat up in the dim firelight. "What do you want?!"

We're surrounded, Orin replied. ***Do you know how to use a sword?***

Jodhin annoyance immediately melted away as she noticed the pack of wolves that surrounded their little camp. There was close to a dozen of them, and there was a madness in their eyes that sent Jodhin's heart plummeting to her knees. *Oh, dear Goddess*, she thought, her mouth going suddenly dry as her palms grew damp. She slowly rose, careful not to make any sudden moves. "They're rabid," she said to Orin.

No, they're not, Orin grimly replied. ***They're controlled by magic. This is Sedric's work.***

"Goddess, have mercy," she whispered. "What do we do?"

Go untie Icshar, he instructed. ***He's trained to fight.***

Jodhin looked over to find the stallion straining against his reins, which she had tied to a low branch. She moved over to him as quickly as she dared.

Take the sword before you untie him, Orin instructed. ***Even if you don't know how to use it, you'll be better off than without it.***

She did as she was bidden, and as soon as he was free, Icshar reared, screaming a challenge to the wolves.

As though that were a signal of some sort, the pack surged forward.

Jodhin had no time to think. Clutching the sword hilt with both hands, she swung it back and forth with all her strength at any wolf that came near her. It was hard to see them, however; the fire had burned down from its former blaze, and dawn had not yet fully come. But she could hear her success with every lupine cry, and see it in the blood that glistened on her blade.

There seemed to be a lull in the wolves' attack against her, and Jodhin turned towards Orin, just as three of the wolves leapt upon him. With a gasp, she swung her sword down upon the neck of the largest of them. It fell to the ground, dead. She had no chance to help Orin with the other two, however, as another wolf sprang out towards her from the darkness.

"Use your power to set them on fire!" she called to Orin as she swung her sword at the wolf.

She missed.

The impact of the wolf's leap knocked the sword from her hands and sent her sprawling to the ground. The great animal's jaws snapped at her throat, but Jodhin was able to raise her left forearm and block his potentially-fatal bite. With little effort, however, its teeth punctured the flesh of her arm, causing her to cry out in pain. She tried to push the wolf off her, tried to gather her legs so as to kick at it, but it was too heavy and would not be moved. Her arm was in agony, but she dared not slacken its force against the back of the wolf's jaws, lest it snap her arm in two like a twig and then go for her throat once more. If only she could reach the sword.

Her strength began to wane, and she'd tended in her father's fields often enough to know that she would soon be as helpless as a sheep, and just as quickly as dead.

A shrill, equine scream interrupted her thoughts, and she turned her head to see Icshar charging towards her. He drew close and stretched out his neck, biting the wolf attacking her, and drawing its attention away from her. Icshar reared as the wolf leapt toward him, bringing his wicked hooves down upon the wolf's head with a sickening crack.

Jodhin scrambled out of the way of the fight and reclaimed her sword. Her left arm was bloody and bruised and essentially useless to her now. Gripping the sword in her right hand, she rose, fighting off a wave of dizziness. Icshar was trampling into the ground what was left of the wolf and Orin had just dispatched the last of the wolves that were attacking him. The rest of the animals lay dead, scattered around the ebbing flames of the campfire.

The battle was over, and Jodhin swayed on her feet. She began to shake uncontrollably, and Orin moved towards her.

Sit down before you fall down, he told her, ***and breathe deeply. The feeling will soon pass.***

She did as he instructed, drawing her knees to her chest and resting her forehead upon them. Without warning, she burst into tears. Through her sobs, she could hear Orin's soothing purr, but it did nothing to stem the flow of her tears. Before long, however, the sobs and shaking

subsided, and she raised her head to find both Orin and Icshar standing patiently by.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, drying her face in a fold of her skirt.

Nonsense, Orin replied, in the softest tone Jodhin had ever heard him take. ***It's a natural reaction, especially for one who has never experienced such a thing before.*** He nudged her with his head. ***You should tend to your wounds now.***

The sun was beginning to rise, and Jodhin rose as well, grasping Icshar's reins and leading him down to the stream that ran near the campsite. She washed the blood and dirt from her arm and retrieved the salve from Icshar's saddlebag. Her wounds were not as deep as she'd anticipated, though she knew she probably should see a Healer.

She removed the cleaner of the two petticoats she was wearing and tore it into strips. After applying the salve, she wrapped her arm as well as she could in the makeshift bandages. She then searched Icshar carefully, finding more scratches than bite wounds, though some were fairly deep. She washed them all and tended them to the best of her ability before turning to Orin, who had silently followed them to the stream.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

A few scratches, but nothing serious, he replied.

"We should wash them anyway," she said, motioning for him to draw closer to the stream.

He padded through the soft grass and lay down next to her. She wet one of the strips of cloth in the stream and set about to cleaning his wounds.

"Why didn't you destroy them with fire?" she asked softly.

There was a long pause, so long that Jodhin stopped waiting for an answer. She sighed inwardly and realized that she would have to accept that her companion would remain a mystery. But he surprised her.

I—my Defender was killed by fire, he replied in a voice so soft, Jodhin thought she might have imagined it.

As she applied some of the salve to a cut on Orin's shoulder, she thought of Alcuin and Daran and ventured a question. "How is it that you are still here?"

Orin snorted derisively. ***A joke of Arana Herself, I expect.***

The bitterness of his tone filled Jodhin's mind, but she pushed through it to softly voice another question. "What happened?"

We were on the border fighting raiders, he replied after another long pause. ***We were surrounded by a dozen men with crossbows and swords. I called fire down upon them, but somehow, Alchor wasn't shielded properly. He was killed along with the raiders.*** A distant expression came into Orin's eyes, as though he were looking at something only he could see. ***I felt him die.***

Jodhin paused in her ministrations as she realized the magnitude of his story. "I'm sorry," she said.

Everyone's sorry, he shot back bitterly. ***It changes nothing.***

Jodhin continued to clean his wounds. "So you cut yourself off from the rest of the Guardians?"

Rather than face their pitying stares day after day? he asked. ***Wouldn't you?***

"Can you not choose another Defender?" she inquired, looking up from her work to meet his golden eyes.

He fixed her with a cold stare that sent a chill down her back and then abruptly rose and walked away. ***We should leave as soon as possible. Sedric must know that you have the scroll and he will make another attempt as soon as he is able.***

Jodhin let out a shaky breath. She had the distinct feeling that if Orin hadn't moved himself out of arm's reach, he would have physically lashed out at her. She took a steadying breath to calm her racing heart. "When will that be?" she asked.

It took him almost two days to recover from bespelling the trees against you. Forcing animals to do your bidding takes more energy, however. I expect that he will make another, more powerful attempt against us in a few days.

"We're only three days from Atalar," she pointed out.

Which is why we must hurry, Orin replied. ***Sedric knows that he has only one more chance to keep the scroll from being delivered. He will make the most of his opportunity.***

Jodhin felt slightly nauseous, but she only nodded. "Icshar needs to eat first."

Very well, but be quick about it.

While Icshar ate his grain, Jodhin filled her waterskin and cleaned up camp. To save time, she saddled him while he was still eating, and it wasn't too long before they were able to continue on their journey.

* * *

From the top of the hill, she could see the city. It spread before her on the horizon, a dark blur against the landscape. They were almost there. A few more hours, and her journey would be over.

"It's so big," she said, naked awe in her voice.

Wait until you see it up close, Orin replied.

Jodhin kicked Icshar into a canter, and they continued on their way. They'd barely stopped to eat or sleep in the past three days, and, seeing the city, the only thing Jodhin could think about was a hot bath, a real meal, and a soft bed. It had been an uneventful three days. She was certain, given how they'd pressed themselves, that they'd be able to get to Atalar before Sedric recovered enough to use his magic again.

The Road was constantly busy now, but with a Guardian by her side, no one gave her more than a passing glance. Jodhin was a little disappointed, however. She'd expected to meet a Defender on the Road— she wanted nothing more than to turn the scroll over to someone who was better equipped to deal with it—but she had yet to even *see* a trace of her kingdom's protectors, to say nothing of meeting one. Orin had said that most Defenders were on Patrol in the various districts of the kingdom and that those who were assigned to Atalar generally stayed in the city. It was unlikely that they would meet one until they arrived at the Palace.

"Have you been in the Palace before?" she asked as a carriage passed them.

Alchor and I were assigned to the city Patrol once, Orin replied. ***A lot of that time was spent at the Palace. It's quite an impressive structure—and filled with a great deal of political machinations.***

It was the first time that he had spoken of his Defender since they had been attacked, and Jodhin was surprised to hear Orin speak his name so casually.

"What will you do after this?" she asked.

I don't know, he replied.

"I hope . . . I hope you won't be alone anymore," Jodhin said.

Perhaps. I don't—

Orin's mindvoice was cut short as he let out a fierce scream and fell to the ground.

Jodhin pulled Icshar up short and looked back to see a crossbow bolt protruding from Orin's left shoulder.

"Orin!" she gasped.

Go! he commanded, struggling to rise. ***Get out of here!***

"But—I—" she stammered, hesitating. She couldn't just leave him. She looked around to find that the Road was suddenly unnaturally free of people, except for a small band of men on horseback who were riding hard towards them from behind.

They're Sedric's men, Orin said ominously. ***Jodhin,* go*! Sedric has this whole area bespelled, and we have to move out of his range!***

"You can run?" she cried.

It will take more than a crossbow bolt to stop me, he said, dashing forward. ***Now, come on!***

Icshar was straining at the reins, and Jodhin suspected he'd sensed the magic and danger just as he had before. She kicked his sides and he broke into a canter and then a gallop. She looked over her shoulder to find that Sedric's men were gaining ground. She urged Icshar on, but it didn't seem to help.

"They shouldn't be catching up so fast!" she cried.

It's magic, Orin replied.

Jodhin's heart beat fast, faster than Icshar's hooves on the Road. She looked back again to find that one of the men was lifting his crossbow. She leaned over the pommel and kicked Icshar's sides. He broke into new speed, but it was not enough.

A searing pain ripped into Jodhin's back, and she cried out in agony.

Jodhin!

She could hear Orin's voice in her mind, but she could no longer see him. The landscape swam before her eyes, and she felt herself growing weak. She couldn't draw breath and her vision began to darken. From behind her, she heard Orin scream. She turned in the saddle to see him standing in the middle of the Road, his entire posture a challenge to Sedric's men.

"Orin—no—" She tried to call out to him, but her voice was merely a whisper. "You can't—" She turned back around and pulled on the reins, but Icshar paid no heed to her commands. He continued at his unrelenting pace, and she turned once more, searching for Orin.

He was too far away and Sedric's men were gaining ground fast. She could never get back in time, even if Icshar were responsive. "Orin—"

Darkness closed in on her, taking away the rest of her words. She felt herself falling, falling down into the darkness and a blinding heat that threatened to consume her soul.

* * *

Jodhin could hear voices above her, all around her, even in her head. She opened her eyes to see the smiling face of an elderly woman bending over hers.

"How do you feel, my dear?"

Jodhin focused her attention on what her body was telling her. "It hurts a little to breathe," she replied. "I feel so weak."

"You had four broken ribs, a crossbow bolt piercing your lung, and a concussion," the woman replied. "We've kept you in Trance for over a week in order to Heal you." She smiled at Jodhin. "Coming out of Trance can be disorienting, but you're going to be just fine. Do you think you can sit up?"

Jodhin nodded and, with the woman's help, drew herself up to a semi-sitting position. She noticed then that there were other people, and even a few Guardians, in the room. All but one of them, including the woman who was helping her, wore the formal robes of a Healer. "Where am I?" she asked, dazed. She glanced over at the nearest Guardian. "Orin?"

Jodhin saw the woman glance in silent supplication to one of the men who was standing at the foot of her bed. He came over and took the place of the woman, who, with the other Healers, retired from the room.

"You're in the Palace," the man said.

Jodhin shook her head in weak confusion. "The Palace? But I was on the Road," she said. "What happened? Where's Orin?"

"Orin sent out a MindCall for help to the Guardians here in the city. We came at once."

Jodhin suddenly remembered and, gasping, struggled to sit up fully. "The scroll! Sedric!"

With gentle hands, the man held her down. "Don't worry—we have the scroll—and Sedric. Orin told us a little of your story, but I'd like to hear everything that happened to you, from the beginning."

Jodhin related the events that had occurred, from meeting Alcuin to the moments before she lost consciousness on the Road.

The man smiled at her. "I want to personally thank you for what you have done, Jodhin. It was very, very brave. You saved my life, and I am in your debt."

Jodhin drew in a soft breath, noticing for the first time the circlet of gold that crowned his head. "King Leyon!" she exclaimed. She then took a second, good look at him and frowned. "But—but you don't look like a king." He was dressed in simple, brown linen that nearly matched the color of his hair and eyes.

Leyon laughed. "I only wear formal Court dress when I have to," he replied. "Jodhin," he began, sitting on the edge of her bed, "there's something you need to know about Orin."

"He was hurt," Jodhin said. "Is he all right?"

"As soon as he became aware of Sedric's men, Orin sent out a MindCall to the Guardians here in Atalar, telling us what was happening," Leyon said. "He gave us your name and told us what you were carrying. More than a dozen Guardians and Defenders immediately set out. When they arrived, they found you on the Road, unconscious, and brought you back here."

"But where is he?" Jodhin asked. Surely he must have defeated Sedric's men, she reasoned, for the scroll was in the king's possession, and she was still alive.

"Orin called fire down on Sedric's men," Leyon told her. "He didn't have the energy to shield himself when he did it, but it was the only way to stop them from killing you both." He paused for a moment. "Do you know what that means?"

Jodhin bit her bottom lip, trying to remember. "Orin had said something about Alchor not being shielded," she said, "but surely it's not the same thing." She looked at Leyon hopefully. "Is it?"

"I'm afraid it is," he replied.

"Orin's dead?" she cried.

Leyon nodded.

Jodhin felt her eyes fill with tears. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "But—he said he couldn't talk to other Guardians, or use his power."

"He isolated himself from all of us after Alchor died," Leyon said. "He may very well have believed himself unable to use his power. I suspect, however, that he was simply unwilling to do either—until it was absolutely necessary, that is."

"But how did I survive?" she asked. "If he couldn't shield me—"

"Unlike Alchor," Leyon replied, "you were far enough away from Orin when he called down the fire. Though from where we found you on the Road in relation to Orin's position, I suspect that you probably felt the heat of it."

Jodhin nodded, remembering how it had seemed as if hell itself had tried to possess her. She blinked quickly, fighting for control. "I didn't tell him—I never thanked him for helping me. I would have died if it hadn't been for him."

One of the Guardians rose and padded over to Jodhin's bedside, purring softly. Through her tears, Jodhin gazed into the Guardian's emerald eyes.

Orin wanted you to know that you made him feel less alone, a soft feminine voice said in her mind. ***We didn't know how to help him. You did. I don't think you can know how much that meant to him, or how much it means to us.***

The lump in Jodhin's throat prevented her from replying. She hadn't realized how much she had come to care for the cantankerous cat. That she would never see him again seemed impossible at that moment.

"We've sent word to your family to let them know that you are well," Leyon said. "After you've healed, we'll send you home with a royal escort."

Home. After all she had experienced, even Jodhin would have thought that word would have been most welcome to her hearing. But it was not. She looked up at King Leyon. "Do I have to go back?"

He raised an eyebrow. "No," he replied slowly, "but don't you want to? Your family has been very worried about you."

A small, sad smile stretched Jodhin's lips. She did not doubt the king's word, but she knew how it would be if she went home. Karah would have hysterics for a day or two, and then things would go back to the way they had always been. And then Jodhin would find herself in the same position she had been on the morning she had met Alcuin. It would be better not to go back at all.

"I don't really have a place there," she told the king.

You will always have a place among us, the emerald-eyed, Earth Guardian said.

Leyon nodded his agreement. "You saved my life, and you saved the kingdom from a very evil man. It's your choice." He reached out and stroked the Guardian's fur. "As Daelis said, you will always have a place among us." He rose from her bedside. "I have a Council meeting to attend, but we will talk again soon. Rest now."

Jodhin watched as he and Daelis left the room. A sense of peace and belonging filled her soul, and she thought how singular it was that she should feel so at home among strangers, yet so alien at home.

That's because it was never really a home for you, a female voice sounded in her mind.

Jodhin looked across the room to see the Guardian weave her way around the bed and tables to come sit by Jodhin's bedside.

My name is Karashyn, she said, and Jodhin couldn't help but notice the deep, startling blue of her eyes.

"You're a Water Guardian?" she asked.

Yes, Karashyn replied.

"I love my sister and her family," Jodhin said, returning to Karashyn's earlier comment, "and I know they love me. It's just—" She faltered, ashamed to voice the rest of the thought.

It's not always enough, is it?

Jodhin shook her head. "No," she conceded softly.

It's not your fault, Karashyn said.

Jodhin did not reply.

What will you do now?

"I think I might like to be a Handmaiden," she answered. "Maybe even a Healer, though I don't know if I have the Gift for that."

You could be tested for it, Karashyn said, ***but—***

"But what?" Jodhin prompted.

Have you thought about being a Defender?

Jodhin blinked. "A *Defender*? Me?" She started to laugh, but it hurt too much. The whole idea was absurd. It was the Guardians who chose the Defenders. She had no say in the matter at all.

I don't think it's absurd*,** Karashyn replied. ***And you do have a say—either 'yes' or 'no.'"

Jodhin sobered, her heart beating fast with fear—or was it hope? "What do you mean?"

I'm asking you to be my Defender, Karashyn said. ***It's not an easy life, as I think you well know by now. But—***

Jodhin waited this time for her to finish the thought on her own.

We could be making a difference . . . together, rather than alone, she concluded. ***That* is *what you want, isn't it? To do something that matters?***

Jodhin could only stare at her for a long moment. "I don't know what to say," she finally replied.

Just —think about it, Karashyn said. ***You are still Healing, and perhaps it would not be wise to decide anything right now.*** She rose to her feet. ***I will come by to visit again tomorrow. We can talk. You can take all the time you need to decide.***

"I think I'd like some company," Jodhin said, but would not venture beyond that. It was all so sudden, so overwhelming, that she was almost afraid to contemplate it. She? A Defender?

Then I will see you tomorrow, Karashyn replied. ***Rest well, Jodhin.***

Jodhin's eyes followed the great black cat as she gracefully left the room. She let out a slow, long breath and carefully lay back down in bed.

A Defender, she thought. Was that what she wanted? A life of danger, and probably one cut short by an enemy's sword? A life of hardship and difficulties—

A life where you would be making a difference.

The thought cut across all her protests, silencing them. *That* was all that mattered, not worrying about events that might never happen.

Somewhere deep in her soul, Jodhin knew that she would accept Karashyn's offer, and that was enough for now.

The End

Currently a seminary student, Q. S. Archer will soon be returning to the world of work. In addition to writing, her interests include history, astronomy, and literature. Under her other name, Jaime L. Hathaway, she has published The Necklace, a novella of the persecuted church in North Korea.

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as if he had once been encrusted with barnacles. Quirk trusted him like no one else. Over the years that they had sailed together, his seamanship, his knowledge of wind and water, the sheer strength of his arms, had brought them safely around or through many storms. When he thought of McBride, Quirk saw him standing there at the tiller, seeming to hold in check the force of the whole sea, roaring orders to the rest of them. At times like that, even Quirk did what he was told.

Quirk walked over to the tiller, glancing around the boat at the furled sails, at the crew being kept busy mending sheets and cleaning decks.

"How are the men?" he asked.

"They mutter about Captain Crellin, the *Phynnodderee*."

"Crellin is a fool. A bully and a coward, the worst kind of man. The *Phynnodderee* is probably halfway to Gaul now in a thousand pieces, her cargo back in the sea."

"Aye."

McBride generally acted as spokesman for the rest of the crew when it came to speaking to Quirk. At the same time, Quirk relied upon him to control the boat and relay his orders to the men. It was difficult being caught between Captain and crew like that.

"And you?"

"The men know that if Captain Crellin has made it to the Western Isles, he'll get a good price for his cargo and ours will only fetch a half its worth. At the same time they know the risks. We're all just impatient. You're right not to sail in this."

"It can't last for much longer."

"No."

McBride looked over at the quay then, his wariness clear in his eyes. He nodded slightly in that direction.

"Visitor."

A roughly-dressed man, a beggar perhaps, had walked along the quay and stopped at *Sheerwater*. His clothes looked old, often repaired, ragged. His hair was crudely cut. Quirk was put in mind of some great, old crow perched there on the quay, his feathers greying and unkempt but his eyes still sharp beads of black. Over his shoulder, the strap of a leather bag.

A hawker perhaps, hoping to sell them some useless trinket.

"Captain Quirk?"

"What can I do for you?"

"May I come aboard?"

McBride exclaimed quietly beside him.

"If you can give me one good reason why you should do so," said Quirk.

The stranger smiled at that. "Because I wish to book passage with you. It will make it difficult if I am unable to come aboard."

"You wish to book passage? To where, stranger?"

"I have need to travel towards the Western Isles. You are set there with your cargo of smoked herring, are you not?"

"You seem to know much about me and my business." Quirk still had not moved from his position at the tiller next to McBride. He stood there with his arms folded, much of his suppressed anger clear in his voice.

"You and your ship are well known in this port. So large and fast a vessel."

Quirk knew the man was trying to placate him, trying to get round him with his easy praise. A part of him fell for it though.

"We carry cargo, not passengers. Everyone on this ship works."

"I can pay well, Captain."

"You can? Even if you had a pot of Faerish gold it wouldn't help you. In this fog we can't navigate. And with no wind we can't even move.

"I can find our way in this fog."

"No one can."

"I can."

Quirk was intrigued now, and a little off-balance at this unexpected turn of conversation. "Well, well. And I suppose you can arrange for the wind to blow too?"

"Aye, I think I can, if you're willing to take me."

Quirk snorted, laughing openly. At the same time he was disconcerted. This was no ordinary stranger. Everyone born and raised on the island was wary of magic, knew well that inhuman creatures walked the land. And Quirk, a sailor, was more superstitious than most. His life was spent at the mercy of the sea, and the gods and demons who lived there.

At the same time, he had found it best over the years not to show any of this fear to his men, to appear the fearless skeptic.

"And what is your plan, old stranger? Will you blow us all the way to the Western Isles yourself? Or will you row?"

"Captain." It was McBride beside him, speaking quietly so that no one else would hear. There was something a little like fear in his voice, this man that had shouted down tempests. His eyes were wide, concentrating on the stranger as if caught by some glamour.

"What is it?"

"The stranger. I have heard stories, Captain. We all have. I'm thinking maybe I know who this is. You know the name—Mannanan Mac Lir. The sorcerer. The great sorcerer. We must be careful."

Quirk kept his eyes on the stranger whilst they talked. "Just stories, McBride. Mac Lir is a myth."

"It makes sense. They say he can shroud the island in mist if it is threatened, that he can control the weather, that he can navigate with his eyes closed."

"And do they say also that he begs passage on cargo ships when he needs to travel?"

"Not that I know. But if this is he, why does he really want passage, I'm wondering? Where is he really trying to get to?"

Quirk snorted. "He's just a man in need of a boat to get him to the Western Isles. If he does happen to be a powerful sorcerer too, then I'm sure he'll look after us on the way and pay well."

McBride said nothing else. He didn't need to; he knew that Quirk had heard him.

"I can not make the wind blow, Captain." The stranger spoke now, as if he had been listening to their conversation. "But I know one who can. If you're willing to make the journey to Slieu-Whallian and visit Caillagh-Ny-Ghueshag, our Queen of Spells, then we can still be in time to catch the morning high-tide."

Few spoke so openly of the Wycka. Among sailors it was almost unknown to do so, except perhaps when they were far at sea and out of their power. That the stranger so casually invoked the name of the Queen of Spells shot icy water down Quirk's spine. He was in a difficult situation now; clearly this was no ordinary man. He had heard plenty of tales of the prices people paid for using Wycka magic. He feared their ancient, night-time, woodland magic of blood and cobwebs. At the same time, he was conscious of his entire crew looking on, listening to every word,

conscious of his position with them.

"The Druidh say the Wycka's touch carries disease, that they bring down plagues, consort with spirits and with the *Faer*, the Little People."

"You mustn't believe everything the Druidh say either."

A few sailors had drifted over as the conversation had continued. There was an audible gasp from them now. Only someone powerful or foolish would be openly critical of the Druidh in such a public place. Quirk feared them as much as he feared the Wycka. Perhaps more—their hard, bright, green magic seemed somehow less human. And the control they held over the lives of the islanders seemed to grow greater with each season.

He was in a tricky corner and the stranger stood there still, smiling gently as if they were discussing the weather. He could see only one way out. And, who knew, it might even allow them to get their cargo to the Western Isles after all.

"Very well. I will visit Caillagh-Ny-Ghueshag and ask for her help. Although I do not see why she would wish to. It is a four-hour walk to Slieu-Whallian. Assuming I'm not turned into a beetle and squashed, I can be back by first light to catch the ebb. You are welcome to spend the night on board if you wish."

He turned to McBride, who looked clearly troubled by the whole situation. "You have *Sheerwater*. Look after our guest."

McBride nodded. "Take a lamp."

Quirk reached up to one of the ship's booms and picked off a brass and glass lantern, its base full of fish oil ready for the night watch. It would be as dark as peat out of town.

He walked back across the gangboard to the quay and the waiting stranger. He was taller when you were close to him, and his face looked old and worn. But his clothes and boots had once been well-made.

The stranger reached then into his leather bag and pulled out a sheet of creamy parchment and a quill pen. Swiftly, resting the thick paper on his spare hand, he made some marks, then handed it across to Quirk.

"Give this to Caillagh-Ny-Ghueshag and I think she will help us."

Quirk nodded. He had met perhaps one other person in his entire life that could write. He took the paper and looked at the marks on it. They meant nothing to him, although he liked their clever intricacy, like so many knots in a fine rope. He folded the paper carefully and put it in a pocket.

The stranger made a sudden, complicated movement with his left hand then and touched the lamp that Quirk carried. It sparked instantly into flame and began to burn with the greenish-yellow flame of fish oil.

He smiled. Quirk, unable to think of anything to say, nodded once again and strode off toward the town.

Outside Douglas, the island was dark save for the occasional croft or cottage. The land sloped upwards away from the coast, and he soon climbed up far enough to escape the fog. By then it was fully night. There was no moon and the stars seemed especially cold and distant. His oil-lamp was a flickering, insubstantial smudge of light, crushed by the weight of the darkness. There could have been anyone or anything walking behind him, or beside him, and he would never have known.

He knew the tracks and paths of the island as well as anyone; he had spent much of his youth wandering over them. But even so, there were frequent alarms when it seemed that he was lost. The night played tricks on him. Time and again he thought he was long past turnings

in the path before they finally slipped out of the gloom.

He had been to Slieu-Whallian twice before. Once as a boy, brave enough to get within sight of Caillagh-Ny-Ghueshag's house, not brave enough to approach it. The second time, as a young man—brash and foolish no doubt. He had come to a rolling. He had been full of excitement at that, he remembered, probably the worse for drink. But when it came to it, he couldn't watch. He had stood apart from the shouting crowd and left quietly before the end.

On both occasions it had been a bright, clear summer's day. Now it was the middle of a very dark night, and a different matter indeed. He could easily turn around and return to the harbour. Everyone would understand. No one need even know.

Across the valley, he could see the light from the Queen of Spells' house. She may or may not be awake—as a Firegiver she would always keep a flame burning for people to take from when they needed it. The long, steep slope of Slieu-Whallian was invisible of course, but he knew that her house, an ancient crofter's cottage, was right at its foot, within sight of the small lake in the valley. He shivered. It was a terrible place. And that she chose to live there, of all places on the island, was the most chilling thing of all.

But he had come this far; he wouldn't turn back now. He thought of his men back on *Sheerwater* and wished that McBride at least was there with him. He thought about the stranger and wondered once again what the writing on the note said. If this really was Mannanan Mac Lir, what was he doing stepping out of their fireside stories and onto the decks of his own boat?

It was the thatch-weights that finally rattled him. He skirted carefully around the lake and up to the cottage and was about to knock boldly when he saw them. Most people lashed large stones to the ends of the ropes that they slung over their roofs to keep them in place. Caillagh-Ny-Ghueshag used skulls—sheep, cows, horses, other animals he couldn't recognize. Skulls filled with small stones and packed soil, the ropes tied through eye-sockets, around horns. In the daylight he would have barely noticed them. Now, standing there in the depths of the night, after that long walk, his nerve finally failed at the sight of them. The impulse to run was strong. He stood there unable to move.

The cottage door opened. Against the wavering red light from inside, he could see only a silhouette, a single figure about his own height. For a moment there was silence as the Queen of Spells considered him, and he, in turn, stood as still as any standing-stone.

"Well, well, a strange visitor in the middle of the night. John Quirk, is it not? It is some time since we last met."

He had expected an old crone, a cracked and hard voice. But she sounded only a little older than him, and there was a hint of amusement in her voice. It was enough to allow him to speak.

"I...I'm sorry, but we've never met before. I've...seen you from afar, that is all."

"Nonsense. It was about this time of night that we met last. Perhaps that was your thinking? You were much smaller then, of course, but you made about as much sense. Your mother laboured for a day and a night and a day to bring you into this world."

"You...delivered me? I never knew"

"You thought we spent all our time putting the evil eye on people, and bringing down diseases on sheep?"

"No. No, I didn't think that. I...don't think like that."

"Well, maybe. You had better come inside. John Quirk must have some pressing reason to come and visit so terrible an old woman at this time of night."

She stepped back, granting him access.

He followed her in, immediately grateful for the warmth of her cottage. He wasn't sure

what he had expected to find, but he was surprised at how ordinary it was. A small, stone room lit by fire and candle, rough rugs on the floor, wooden furniture, everything meticulously swept and cleaned. Familiar smells of peat-fire. Only three shelves of books, strange liquids brewing and bubbling in pots and the occasional alarming totem—a longtail skull, a dead crow, an eye daubed in red on a wall—marked the place out as belonging to the Queen of Spells.

Near the fire, the perpetually burning fire, lay a huge black dog, a great shaggy wolfhound. It watched him keenly as he moved, panting faintly as if it had just returned from a chase.

"My dog. He is called *Moddey Doo*."

"Ah...really?"

"Just my little jest, of course."

"Of course."

The dog didn't move from its place as Quirk sat down, nor did it take its eyes off him once. He tried to ignore it.

"I have come to ask a favour of you."

She handed him a beaker of some hot liquid that smelled slightly of heather and sat down opposite him. Her hair was deepest, richest black, shining in the candle-light. "Drink this. Go on, there's no enchantment in it. It's just a hot drink on a cold night. Drink and tell me of this favour you wish to ask."

He took the beaker and sat. "I have need of travelling to the Western Isles but we are becalmed. The whole island is becalmed. A passenger I am taking suggested you might be able to help us."

"Indeed?"

"He gave me this letter to give to you."

She took the piece of parchment from his hand and angled it toward the fire to read it. Quirk sipped from his drink. It tasted good, warming him from the inside.

She looked back up at him. "Well, well, you do have interesting passengers aboard your boat."

"You know who the man is that wrote this?"

"Of course I do, as do you if you've any sense at all."

"Can I trust him? Is he evil?"

"A little. And a little good, like all of us. But the balance between the two is about right in him. We have dealt with him over many years. There is no malice in him; he won't deliberately set out to do you harm, if that's your meaning. He has protected this island for a long time. Be aware of that; he might consider that to be more important than you and your crew and your boat."

"So, you will help us?"

She seemed to study him for a long moment, as if assessing him or, so it seemed, remembering things about him. He sipped the last of his drink and said nothing.

"I will. Partly because of this letter. Partly because of who it is that you carry with you on your boat. Partly because you are your mother's son. And partly because of you. You are not a bad man and you may even be a good one, some day."

"I...thank you."

"But there will be a price for my help, Captain Quirk."

He sighed quietly. "I thought there might be."

"It is nothing you cannot afford. If I do this for you, and you return safely to the island, all

I ask is that you rename your ship *Caillagh-Ny-Ghueshag*."

"She has been called *Sheerwater* since the day she was made."

"You are afraid to rename her? Afraid of the Druidh maybe, of what folk might say? These are bad times for the old ways, John Quirk."

"No, I am not afraid. She is an old friend, that is all. But I will gladly rename her and gladly sail her with such an auspicious name."

"So it shall be. Stay and guard my dog for me whilst I prepare the magic."

She stood and up and walked into the shadows at the back of the room, disappearing completely from view. It was said that there were tunnels and caverns underneath Slieu-Whallian, a whole Faerish palace perhaps. He wondered if there was some entrance way to them back there. The huge dog's eyes were still intent, unblinking on him. He had the distinct impression that he only had to make a single move and the hound would leap up and kill him. He tried to ignore the thought.

A single, pained scream rang out from the shadows then, alarming and urgent. He started to move, then thought better of it as the dog growled faintly, almost gently. Another scream came, and another. If he were back on board he would have run instantly to see what was happening. Here, he was out of his depth, had no idea what he should do. Another scream came, and then silence.

She reappeared back into the light then, looking a little drained, panting a little like the great dog. In her hand she carried a short length of rope, with four intricate knots strung out along it. She offered the rope to him. He didn't recognize any of the knots; couldn't immediately see how they were tied or how to be untied.

"Take this. When you have need of the wind, stand with your face in the direction you wish to travel and untie a knot. Take care; untie only one at a time. Use two together and your boat will be smashed to twigs by the storm that you summon. To calm the wind, cut off the piece of rope you have untied and cast it into the sea. Four knots should be enough to reach the Western Isles. I presume you can make your own way back."

"Thank you Caillagh-Ny-Ghueshag."

"Very well. Now you must go if you are to catch the tide at Douglas Town, yes?"

"Yes."

Outside the door, he picked up his lantern where he had left it. He turned to face the darkness, then turned back. "May I ask you a question?"

"Another favour, John Quirk? Well now. Let me see—you were wondering why I live where I do?"

"Aye." He spoke quietly now, almost in a whisper. "I came to a rolling once. I was young. I saw the spiked barrel they put her in, a woman little older than me. I heard her screams, her pleading. I heard the cries stop part way down. I saw what was left of her at the bottom. I saw the lake where they drown those that survive, the place where they bury those that don't. Why...why would you live here, here of all places on the island?"

"Many reasons, John Quirk. Partly to remember all those women who were killed as you describe. One or two of them Wycka, my sisters. Most ordinary women. Each and every one of them deserves to be remembered in some way, to be named aloud on certain days, during the rites and ceremonies. Also, this is a place of great power. There is rage and hatred here. On stormy nights the air seethes with it, with their spirits. This is where I need to be. One day soon there will be a battle between the old ways and the new, between Wycka and Druidh, and this is where it will start. Or maybe where it will end."

He nodded at that and turned back to look at the dark. Away in the east, the first, faint lightening of the sky could just be seen, a pale glow over the hills.

"Remember what I have said and remember the price, John Quirk."

"I will."

He set off into the night, his fish-oil lantern burning brightly long after it should have flickered out. Three hours later he arrived back at *Sheerwater*—tired, sore, but greatly relieved.

McBride was at his usual post, watching warily. The other crewmembers were below. Only the stranger was on deck; he lay asleep there on the hard wood, his head resting on his leather bag. As Quirk walked back across the gangboard, he stirred and sat up.

"You saw the Queen of Spells? You have it?"

"I do," said Quirk, holding out the length of rope, a little uneasily as if it was likely to come alive and bite him.

"Good. Guard it well, captain, we will have need of it."

Quirk nodded, tied it around his neck with a fifth, loose knot of his own, a rough sailor's necklace next to the small lodestone that he wore on a chain.

"McBride, rouse the crew. We leave for the Western Isles immediately."

The tide was already ebbing. They untied and pushed off from the quay with long, wooden poles. The flow of the river that emptied into the sea at the port, along with the pull of receding tide, carried them slowly away and out toward open water. The fog was as thick as ever and they lost sight of the quay within moments.

Soon they were caught in their own little world, a pocket of sea with mist walls. It seemed that they weren't moving at all although Quirk knew that they must be. It was disconcerting not knowing exactly where they were, what was up ahead. He felt alarm rising; there could be rocks, currents, other boats, all sorts of dangers around them.

The stranger looked calm. He stood right in the bows, looking keenly out to sea, breathing in the spray and air as if he knew their position by smell or taste alone. After long moments, he turned and called to Quirk.

"We are clear of the bay. A south-wester now will take us up along the coast of the island." The stranger pointed off to the port side as he spoke, indicating the direction they needed to travel.

"You are sure?"

"I am."

"Very well. " Quirk took the rope from his neck and began to untie one of the Queen of Spells' knots. It was intricate and unusual and for a time he couldn't see how to do it. Then, by pulling sharply on a particular loop, he found that it fell apart quite easily.

There was calm for a moment. He was conscious of the crew looking at him expectantly. The air didn't stir. He turned to face the south-west as if he would be able to see the wind coming. There was the slightest movement of cold air on his face, like some small sea-creature breathing on him.

The wind picked up rapidly, grew stronger. Quirk shouted for sails to be hoisted. They billowed out instantly, hauling the ship rapidly around and thrusting it forward. The wind was strong, strangely constant too, with no gusts or lulls to it.

Quirk nodded at the stranger. "Tell me, since it seems that we are to be travelling to the Western Isles together, what am I to call you?"

The stranger smiled. "Lir was my father. Mac Lir would be a good name, I think, Captain Quirk."

"Very well." Quirk turned and went aft to the great wooden tiller, where McBride already stood, holding the ship's course with strong, gentle hands. Mac Lir walked to the prow and gazed out to sea as if following a trail he could see on the water, although the fog was as thick and impenetrable as ever.

They sailed like that for the whole morning, Quirk and McBride taking turns at the tiller and going below for a few hours' sleep. Mac Lir stood there the whole time like a figurehead. They had to peer around the masts to see him. Occasionally he would lift one of his arms a little, which they took to indicate a slight course adjustment. The higher the arm, the harder they needed to turn.

Some time in the early afternoon, Quirk was back at the tiller, his eyes alternating between the figure of Mac Lir and *Sheerwater's* sails. The fog was as thick as before—thicker perhaps. It seemed to Quirk now that they weren't moving at all, even though the wind was constant and strong, holding the sails in taut, rippling curves. Still, they appeared to be nailed there to the water.

If Mac Lir had their course right, it would be a swift journey after all. He was thinking about the money they could make on their cargo at the Western Isles, how to pitch the trading, when Mac Lir rapidly held up both arms. The meaning seemed clear. Quirk called to the men to haul in all the canvas; stop the boat.

He lashed the tiller straight and hurried forwards to where Mac Lir stood peering overboard. There was something down there.

"What is it?"

The water all around them was strewn with debris. A raft of wooden splinters and timbers bobbing and blinking in the swell. Quirk picked up one of the long catch-nets that were stowed in the bows and fished some of them out.

They were ship's timbers, no doubt about it. He picked out a large piece. Clinker built, poorly maintained and in need of tar. They hadn't been in the water long though; the torn edges were still sharp and clean.

"A local boat, I think. Hit some rocks maybe?"

"This one is burned, Captain."

He hadn't heard McBride come up behind them. The tall man was standing next to him, examining another of the fragments of wood. "See."

Quirk took the piece of wood. Its edges were charred black. It was, he knew, surprisingly hard to set fire to a wooden ship at sea, even when the air wasn't so sodden with fog. He handed the piece on to Mac Lir.

The stranger turned the blackened shard of ship's timber over and over in his hands, as if searching for some answers there. He said nothing for a while.

"Do you know this boat, Captain?"

"Aye. It's *Phynnodderee*, I'm sure of it. Captain Crellin. He left Douglas Port two days back, on the same course as us, boasting that he could find his way through a bit of mist."

"You knew him well?"

"We'd sailed alongside and against each other for years. But he was no friend. A cruel and stupid man, I'm surprised he lasted as long as he did. I wouldn't go to sea on any boat he was the master of. Whether he burned alive or drowned first, I can't say that he didn't get what he deserved. That's harsh maybe, but only the truth."

"So he may have sailed onto rocks?"

"Aye. But the burning, Mac Lir—that I can't explain."

The stranger continued to turn the piece of timber over and over in his hands. "No."

"What's going on here, Mac Lir? You expected something like this, I'm thinking. You must tell me what it is you're asking my crew to face. We're sailors, and good ones, but we're not warriors and we're not heroes."

Mac Lir smiled, regret clear on his face. "I know nothing, Captain Quirk. I have heard some rumours of something out here, it is true, but I do not know what. That is why I took passage with you; to see what I could find."

"What have you heard?"

"Vague...rumours of danger."

"What rumours?"

"You must understand that some of what I hear is very unclear. Gulls and Storm Petrels come off the sea screeching about threats and dangers. Maybe they really have seen something, or maybe they have just caught sight of a Sea Eagle or a shadow upon the face of the sea. Or I catch a faint scent of something on the wind, or the Wycka tell me of some portents and signs that have come to them. I hear all these things and when it seems that there is some substance to them, I come to see. I can't give you anything specific, Captain."

He sighed. "Very well. Maybe Crellin was fool enough to set fire to *Phynodderree* before he sailed her onto some rocks. Or maybe something did the damage for him. I suppose we might as well sail on as back, but it must be clear between us that you tell me everything you know, or even suspect."

"Very well."

Quirk called to his men to start putting the canvas back up. Smoothly, they pushed on, nosing their way through the shattered remains of *Phynodderree*.

They sailed on as before, Mac Lir at his post in the bows, Quirk and McBride taking turns at the tiller. The wind showed no signs of fading or turning. *Sheerwater* skipped sweetly along, her stays and sheets creaking with pleasure at the speed they made.

They must have been somewhere near the northern tip of the island, Quirk reckoned, somewhere near the place where they would need to turn north-westerly, when Mac Lir held up both his arms once again.

He called for the sails to be pulled in. Mac Lir immediately turned back to the boat at that and put one hand firmly over his mouth. Silence. There was danger near at hand.

He weaved his way back around the masts and coiled ropes and up to the bows. "What is it?"

"Boats out there." Mac Lir looked distracted, as if concentrating hard on trying to hear a faint sound.

"How many? Who are they?" They spoke in hushed voices, almost whispering. He was aware of the crew watching them from all over the deck and the rigging, bearded faces peeping out of the mist, waiting to see what would happen, what he would do.

"I can't say. We need to get closer and take a look but...to take *Sheerwater* any nearer ...."

"She stays here; I'll not risk her."

Mac Lir looked away, back into the fog. "Very well. The only way is to go into the water then. Do you swim well, Captain? We'll see them long before they see us."

He hesitated. He took a short knife from his belt and cut off the end of the knotted rope that he still held in his hand, casting the small piece overboard. The wind calmed immediately. Everything became quiet, nothing moving. Even *Sheerwater* stopped creaking and breathing for a moment.

"No. I...won't swim."

Mac Lir looked back, surprised for the first time.

Quirk smiled slightly. "I mean, I don't swim."

"Indeed?" Mac Lir looked fascinated, a little amused. "Yet you make your living on the sea, sailing these dangerous waters. You must be able to swim."

"No. Did you sail with me assuming I'm something I'm not, Mac Lir?"

He smiled. "No, no. But, I'm intrigued."

"Mac Lir, this boat is my home. The sea is my home. But I've seen what the ocean can do and I fear it. I love it, but I know that it does not love me. I know also that if this ship goes down then I will drown. So I've never learned to swim. I've learned not to swim."

"I don't understand."

"If you take chances with the sea, sooner or later it will claim you. Maybe it will anyway. But knowing I'll drown easily makes me more cautious, more careful. If I did learn, then no doubt I'd be more willing to take risks. Captain Crellin, they say, swam well."

"Some might say running this voyage is taking a risk. Or taking me as a passenger."

"Maybe so, but I trust to my instinct too."

"And your men know this?"

"They do. I tell them the first day they come on board, before we ever leave dock. Tell them why too. They always look happier when I do."

"Then...I'll go alone."

"No. We have two coracles we use for ferrying to shore and such. We'll take those if you can handle one. I want to see what's out there too."

Mac Lir slapped him on the back. "Aye, very well, Captain."

They tied long, thin ropes to each of the small, circular, animal-hide coracles and lowered them into the water. Quirk and Mac Lir clambered down the side to kneel in them, bobbing and lurching in the choppy water. They paddled slowly off into the fog, dipping their oars in the water gently and quietly, first on one side, and then the other. They soon lost sight of *Sheerwater*. The lines connecting them to her playing out behind them, held by a crew member back on board but seeming to end in mid-air just behind them.

Quirk's mind conjured up dragons and demons all around them in the heavy fog. He could see indistinct shapes moving around off to his left and right, although there was nothing there if he tried to look directly at them. He tried to ignore them, telling himself it was just the swirling sea mist.

After a few minutes Mac Lir stopped paddling and pointed up ahead. There was a definite shape there now, not shifting around, but dark and stationary in the water. A boat. He could see little detail, could gain no idea of the size and form of the vessel.

He began to see others as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. They were all around, perhaps nine or ten of them. Mac Lir nodded to him and moved on, placing each oar-stroke into the rough seawater with precision and care. They moved forward, careful to keep the line back to *Sheerwater* clear.

He could see figures in one of the boats now. At first it seemed that there were a number of adults and a child standing there. He could hear indistinct voices, several at once. Deep voices. Mac Lir was watched them intently, his lips moving slightly as if counting.

There was something familiar about the smaller figure on the boat but he couldn't decide what. They seemed to be wearing a cloak and some sort of adornment on their head that he

recognized. A sort of uneven, spiked hat or crown.

But he knew, then, that this was no child. An adult, a man. Which meant that the others must be enormous, giants of some sort, nearly twice his height. Much bigger than McBride. He wondered if the smaller figure was a prisoner, or their leader. If only he could put his finger on whom that person was. He knelt there rocking to-and-fro in the flimsy coracle, the waves almost coming over its sides, his legs becoming numb with cold, and tried to remember.

Mac Lir turned to him and nodded back in the direction of *Sheerwater*. Quirk turned and pulled smoothly but firmly twice on his line. Almost immediately, the crew back on the boat began to reel both of them in. Quirk watched the giants and the ships fade back into the grey gloom.

Halfway back, it came to him who the small figure must be.

"They are *Tho-Mooraine*," said Mac Lir. He, Quirk and McBride stood at Sheerwater's tiller, talking in quiet tones about what they had seen out there on the water.

"Never heard of them. Who are they? What are they?" asked Quirk.

"Their homeland is far away, not of this world. They are pirates and raiders, but also great navigators. They live off the pillaging of ships and coastal towns. They know the currents and passageways that can take them between the worlds, from one sea to another. I have never heard of them in these waters before, but there is no mistaking them."

"They are giants?"

"Yes. And strong and fierce, a terrible enemy." He sighed. "I fear for the island. This behaviour puzzles me though. They are scavengers. Occasionally two or three of them will band together to take on a larger ship or a town. But there's a whole fleet of them out there."

"The Archdruidh?"

Mac Lir raised an eyebrow at that. "Ah, you saw him then? You recognized him?"

"I did. At first I thought he must be a prisoner. But now I think not."

"And I think I agree with you." Mac Lir spoke in hushed, almost bitter tones, but it was McBride's face that caught Quirk's attention. Anyone that didn't know him would have seen little change. Quirk recognized the slight scowl, the narrowing of his eyes. It was what he did when a black storm that filled half the sky ran hard at them. In him it was like other men shouting.

Not taking his eyes off McBride, he said, "But why? The Druidh protect the island. Why would they be out here, with these invaders? I don't understand any of this."

"They would make us all slaves." It was McBride that spoke, almost whispered.

"Slaves? Yes, my friend, maybe they would," said Mac Lir. "The Druidh have an army, it seems. Or perhaps a distraction for the people of the island, or something to terrify and cow them with."

"But...at what price? These *Tho-Mooraine*—how can the Druidh trust them? Hope to control them?"

"They play a dangerous game. At a guess, the *Tho-Mooraine* are to be the new Lords of Mann, with the Druidh at their side when all the Wycka are killed. At their side or at their back. We must stop this, Quirk, stop this fleet reaching shore."

"But how?" Quirk was half-shouting, suddenly angry, afraid. "How can we do anything? We are one cargo ship against a fleet! A fleet of warships!"

Mac Lir looked out to sea, into the fog, and then up at the sky as if told the time from a sun that he could not see. "Your cargo, Captain. May I buy it off you?"

"What? My cargo? I don't understand."

"Time is short. May I buy your cargo? I will give you a good price."

"Money...isn't the concern; I don't see how we can defeat these devils and I don't see what our cargo has to do with it, Mac Lir."

"Nevertheless, I will give you a good price. You can't eat seawater, nor pay your crew with it. Tell me what price you would have got at the Western Isles and tell me quickly."

Quirk sighed, confused. "Very well. You may have the cargo. With Crellin at the bottom of the sea it would have fetched us perhaps three silvers a barrel. But I still ..."

"Then that is what I shall pay." Mac Lir pulled out a leather pouch from inside his cloak and handed it to Quirk. "Take what you think is fair. Then I would be grateful if you could organize your crew to throw the whole cargo overboard. As quietly and as quickly as possible, please."

"What?"

They lowered the barrels gently into the water, the crew working together as calmly and efficiently as if they were unloading at the dockside. There were only occasional mutterings of disbelief at what they were doing. Quirk felt strangely cheated too, even though they had been paid as good a price as they could have hoped for. He was more worried about the *Tho-Mooraine,* though. He repeatedly scanned the thick fog, expecting all the time to see the great hulks of their ships looming suddenly near.

He went to speak to Mac Lir, who was watching his expensive cargo of fish being returned to the sea whence they came.

"The fish are yours to do what you will with, Mac Lir. But *Sheerwater* is not. Tell me what you plan here, why you are doing this thing. Are you preparing to fight?"

Mac Lir smiled. He seemed to be enjoying this. "No, my friend, I am preparing to flee. In these situations I have learned not to fight. This is a fine boat but she is no match for those out there."

"But we cannot just run away."

"I think perhaps we can."

"I don't understand."

"Do you know where we are, Captain?"

"Roughly. Maybe north-east of Ayre, a few miles offshore I reckon."

"That's about right. And with the Queen of Spells' wind abated I'm sure you know where the currents will carry us?"

"Aye."

"Then as you'll know, two or three leagues up ahead are the *Creggyn Doo*, the black rocks that some call *The Teeth*."

"Of course. All sailors know that and all sailors avoid them. They are deadly waters. No keel can pass through there without being ripped open."

"We can."

"No. It is too dangerous."

Mac Lir grinned now. "I know a passage through those rocks. With this tide, with our draught raised now that there isn't all that weight in the hold, with me navigating, we can do it."

"And the *Tho-Mooraine*?"

"I'm thinking they don't know about the *Creggyn Doo*. Even if they do, I'm thinking they won't know about the channel through them that even Manx Captains don't know about. I'm thinking they'll follow us in and founder on the teeth. Shall we try it and see, Captain?"

He could think of no other reply to give, no other course of action that offered much hope. He had to think of the island as well as himself, his crew.

"Very well."

Mac Lir turned and walked to the rail, looked out over the sea. He raised his arms and shouted something, the sound alarmingly loud. The words were indistinct, or in some unknown language. He began to move his hands, his fingers in subtle, complex patterns, as if striving to shape the air into new forms.

The mist began to part, a clear circle of air opening up around them, receding rapidly away outwards over the water. From up above, sunlight shone suddenly through, glorious and hot from a bright blue sky. The walls of fog fell back and back, away from them as Mac Lir continued to form his magic. Or unform it.

The boats of the *Tho-Mooraine* sprang into existence, appearing crisply out of the fog, suddenly very real and nearby, stamped there on the water, conjured from a hazy half-existence into stark reality. Shouts and roars came to them across the gap. Off the other bow, the line of the coast was sharp and clear. The *Creggyn Doo* would be nearby, perhaps only minutes away in the rapid currents that swirled around the northern tip of the island.

There was no breeze, no point in raising canvas. Quirk thought about untying another knot. He thought about the delicate manoeuvres they would need to make when they reached the shoals and thought better of it. He could feel *Sheerwater* being borne along, toward the rocks and the coast. There was nothing to do but stand there on the open ocean, and watch and wait as they were pulled in, as the great boats of the *Tho-Mooraine* were pulled in slowly after them.

They nearly made it.

They were close, very close, the smooth surface of the water already beginning to swirl and roughen as they approached the sharp, underwater rocks.

Great, roaring figures lunged out of the water, up the sides and onto the decks. Giants with fierce, crazy eyes and terrible laughter and great blades drawn from sheaths on their backs. The *Tho-Mooraine*. They must have swum under-water, and caught them up when they thought they were safe.

Some of the crew fought back, others climbing the rigging to try and escape in their panic. The *Tho-Mooraine* attacked them all, knocking the islanders flying with roars of laughter. Quirk saw McBride try to take one of them on, saw him looking suddenly tiny and weak, and saw him knocked sprawling onto the deck with a single, easy sword-blow.

He couldn't see Mac Lir. He ran forward, ready to take on the invaders as best he could, taking with him a short sword blade he had stowed at the tiller.

A heavy, jarring thud that rattled the teeth in his mouth, a sickening, hot pain in his head, and everything went dark.

Before he opened his eyes, before he was even truly conscious again, he knew he was no longer on *Sheerwater*. It didn't smell right and it didn't move right.

The pain in his head came next, and then a dim, grey light as he squinted open his eyes.

The whole crew was there. No sign of Mac Lir. There was blood all over them, cruel cuts and bruises. Ropes bound their hands and feet. Most of them were unconscious, lying at awkward, uncomfortable angles as if they had all just been thrown there like sacks. But they all seemed to be breathing.

From outside, above, he could hear the creaks of the *Tho-Mooraine* ship, the occasional

word spoken in a language he didn't understand, someone somewhere humming a tune.

"I felt them rowing before. They must have hauled us around the *Creggyn Doo*. They are too strong, these giants." It was McBride, speaking off to his left.

He heaved round a bit to see him. A bad cut on his left temple had left dried blood over half his face. In his dreams he had seen McBride's body, slain by the invaders. He had imagined him lying there on the deck of *Sheerwater* as she drifted unmanned onto the black rocks. Over and over again he had seen it. In the distance, thin lines of smoke had risen from the island's coast.

Quirk smiled, although it made his head throb more. Several of the crew appeared to be conscious now, their eyes opening at McBride's words.

"So they have killed none of us. What do you think, McBride—are we hostages? Are we to be set free to tell the islanders about how terrible these *Tho-Mooraine* are? Or have they some other purpose for us?"

"I don't know. But I reckon we are sailing southwest again. I think we may be heading for Douglas Port."

"An invasion?"

"Aye. Maybe."

"Hmm." The light in the hold came from an iron grill in the roof, a hatchway big enough for the *Tho-Mooraine* to climb in and out of. One of them was up there now—massive, booted feet paced backwards and forwards upon the deck.

"Do you think these dogs speak Manx?"

"I've heard none."

Quirk shouted up, "Hey you son of a pig and a scabby longtail, we need water down here! Are you too stupid to tell, or do you have to wait for someone to give you orders?"

The guard paused in his pacing for a moment, then continued as before.

"Apparently not. Well, let us speak quietly just in case. Did anyone see what happened to Mac Lir?"

One of the crewmen spoke. "I saw him holding back three of them. A red fire was coming from his outstretched hands. I saw him thrusting it at them like a sword. He was speaking in some strange language. I didn't see what happened next."

"If only we knew what had become of him. And of *Sheerwater*."

There were calls from up top, but they only sounded like the normal cries of captain to crewmen. The faint humming—a sea-chantey he thought—was still audible from elsewhere on the ship.

"They took all our blades I see. McBride, did they see fit to comb your hair for you?"

McBride grinned at that. "They did not."

Braided into the knotted sheaf of his hair was a long, thin, sharp blade with a small, metal handle. McBride always went about with it, as much out of superstition as anything else.

"So, we can get out of these bonds at least. As for getting out of this hold, I don't fancy our chances too much. Not unless something takes these devils' minds off us for a while."

"Captain! I can see *Sheerwater*. She's tethered to this ship...sail all furled...no one aboard." It was one of the crew, peering through a gap in the carvel-built hull. "She doesn't look damaged."

"Well, well, better and better," said Quirk. Something was slotting into place in his mind, as satisfying as the pieces of a well-carved wooden joint fitting together. He dropped his chin onto his chest for a moment. They were all still there. The pieces were in place.

"Right lads. Someone get hold of McBride's blade, start cutting the ropes. Be subtle for now, if anyone looks in, make sure there's nothing to see. Meanwhile, I rather think that incessant humming is the answer to all this. Tell me, I can't place the tune, who knows what it's called?"

They were all awake now. They listened, some mouthing words, some straining to hear. It was an old sea-tune, that was for sure.

"I know it," said one of the crew. "My father taught me it when I was young. We don't sing it much these days but it's called...it's called...yes, *Run the Southeaster Home*."

"Good work. Southeaster eh? Very well. Someone get my hands free and I think we'll call up a Southeaster of our own."

"That's Mac Lir singing?" asked McBride.

"I think so. They must have gagged him, feared the magic he could speak. But he still knows our position in the water. My guess is a Southeaster will blow the fleet back onto the *Creggyn Doo*."

They were nearly all cut loose now. "McBride and I will look for Mac Lir. He must be in a nearby hold. When the storm hits, the rest of you get out and across to *Sheerwater*. Set her loose from this ship. Leave the coracles behind for us. Batten her down as best you can, drop anchor and try and ride it out. It'll be rough going."

They nodded, saying nothing. Quirk untied the lodestone from his neck and let it swing free, finding north. After a while it settled. Quirk took Caillagh-Ny-Ghueshag's rope then. He remembered her warnings. Shrugging, he turned to face the right direction and untied all three remaining knots.

As before, there was a moment of calm. Then, with a single shout of warning from up above, a solid wall of storm slammed roaring into them. It lifted the ship and threw it across the waters, heeling it over at an alarming angle. It seemed that they might go under for long moments as the boat twisted and lurched around like a twig in a whirlpool.

From up top, there were cries and shouts. It sounded as though some of the giants were injured—crushed by collapsing masts maybe. All around them, audible even above the terrible howl of the wind, the *Tho-Mooraine* vessel creaked and groaned and splintered.

"Go now, go, go! Get across!" He had to shout to make himself heard. They pushed the iron grill up and out, then took turns to climb out, pulling and pushing each other through the gap. Still the ship veered around out of control. Water flooded into the hold as great waves crashed over the entire ship.

Quirk and McBride left last. Up on deck it was chaos. The giants, for all their strength, were struggling to pull in the canvas. The force of the wind had locked ropes fast against masts. Half of the rigging was in tatters anyway, stays flapping dangerously around. They watched as a wave sucked three of the *Tho-Mooraine* into the boiling, bottle-green, slate-grey sea.

The crew were managing to veer and stumble their way across onto *Sheerwater*, going around the edge of the deck and pulling themselves along the bulwarks. There was no sign of the other hatches—too much water flooded the decks. Quirk had a sudden image of a bound Mac Lir drowning in his hold as water gushed in.

They stumbled forward, holding onto each other, half crawling against the fury of the wind and waves, struggling just to find lungfuls of air.

By touch alone, they found the grill. They heaved it aside. The hold wasn't full yet, but it would be soon, the boat slowly succumbing to the volume of water flooding it. Quirk took McBride's blade and pushed himself through headfirst, half-diving, half-falling.

Mac Lir was there, his feet and hands tied, his mouth gagged. The water was already up to his chest. Quirk began to cut the ropes, starting with the feet whilst he could still get at them. Then the hands, then the gag.

"Thank you, my friend." He was badly out of breath. "I hope you...liked my little song?"

"I've heard better. Come on!"

McBride reached down through the hatchway to help heave them back up. It was hard going. For a moment Quirk thought that they wouldn't be able to do it; the weight of water was too great. Then, in a lull between waves, they managed to haul themselves up onto the flooded decks.

Nearly swimming now, they made their way aft, to where *Sheerwater* had been tied.

She was no longer there. The crew had boarded her, and cast themselves off from the *Tho-Mooraine* ship as instructed. They stood some ways off, canvas all in but bucking out of control in the storm. She wouldn't take much more of this battering.

"The coracles are here, Captain." McBride had to shout against the wind. "Tied up tight. But we've no chance of using them in these seas. It'd be certain death!"

Quirk nodded, glanced to Mac Lir, then up to the bows. There seemed to be only a few of the giants left now on their ship. A few still struggled with broken masts and stays. Perhaps the others had all been swept overboard. Ahead of them, the *Tho-Mooraine* fleet was in tatters. Some had already struck the rocks of the *Creggyn Doo* and were crashing over and down into the water. Others, battered by the wind and waves, weren't even getting that far. They dived down into the angry sea before they even got to the Teeth.

Hampered by *Sheerwater*, their ship had been the slowest, and was now the last in line. Between mountainous, alarming waves, through banks of water that might have been spray or mist or rain, Quirk thought he could see five of the ships still afloat ahead of theirs. It was hard to be sure. The seas were terrifying.

He waited for a few moments, then a few moments more. He was cold now, suddenly terribly cold, soaked through with the cold waters of the ocean. Still he waited. Ahead of them, another of the great ships splintered and crashed onto the rocks. Then Quirk took the short length of rope from round his neck once again, cut one piece of it off and hurled the fragment overboard.

The howling of the wind lessened immediately. Around them, the seas raged slightly less as the witch-wind abated by a third. He had to time this right; had to make sure they had a chance to get across to *Sheerwater* without any of the invading boats surviving.

"It's still too much, Captain! We can't get across in this!" Another boat went down then. It stood poised for a moment as if on the crest of a great wave, then crashed down towards the seabed. He had an image then of her crew, of the *Tho-Mooraine* giants as they battled and screamed their last. They were great sailors, Mac Lir had said. Terrible enemies but great craftsmen, great navigators.

He cut the remaining piece of rope in two and threw one half overboard. The wind dropped again, the seas flattening out to something like a normal storm. He glanced at McBride. "We might do it now, Captain. It's a risk, but we might."

"The *Tho-Mooraine* are broken; they are no more threat to us," shouted Mac Lir then. "Come, Quirk, drop this storm and let us escape. The island is safe." There were only two of the giant ships left now—theirs and another. Quirk nodded. Very well. He tossed the last remaining piece of rope overboard.

The wind dropped to a whisper. Between them and *Sheerwater*, the waters calmed,

continuing to roll and swell a little as they settled down. They could make it in the coracles now. Up ahead, the other *Tho-Mooraine* ship, fatally damaged by the tempest, veered suddenly round and lurched down into the water. They had to leave now; the boat they were on wouldn't last much longer.

A hand was on his shoulder then, someone standing next to him, holding him fast. He turned quickly, imagining that one of the *Tho-Mooraine* had crept up to hurl them overboard. He found himself looking directly into the eyes of the Archdruidh.

"You have room for another on your boat?" The voice was quiet, the eyes calm. The words were an instruction for all that they sounded like a question. The mouth smiled.

For a moment he was disoriented. He had to think quickly. He had forgotten about the Archdruidh. But he surely wouldn't know that they had seen him in the fog? He might accept that they believed him to be a prisoner too. Wouldn't he? He needed them now to get him ashore. But was it safe? If they got back to land, could they trust him? The Druidh wouldn't want anyone to know about their alliance with the *Tho-Mooraine*. They had to be careful here.

Quirk prepared to reply. The Archdruidh had his eyes firmly locked on Mac Lir now. But, unexpectedly, it was McBride that spoke.

"My Lord, if we had known you were here! These dogs have made prisoners of us all. Let us get off this broken ship and across to our own." He turned to look directly at Quirk. "You two go first. If the passage is safe, we will follow in the second coracle."

Quirk was too surprised to say anything. He had no idea what McBride was doing, but was too much his friend to argue. He had never known him to show such respect for the Druidh before, nor to give him an order. But, whatever he was thinking, he would let him do it.

He nodded at Mac Lir, who also said nothing, even smiled a little.

The passage across was uneventful. They let themselves down a swaying rope to the water, and stepped precariously into the tethered coracle. Carefully, slowly, they paddled across. With two of them they were dangerously low in the water, and the occasional big wave still threatened to capsize them. But with care the short journey could be made safely.

Quirk was never so pleased to be back on board his own boat. Welcoming, familiar arms hauled them up onto the decks. *Sheerwater* was filled with cries of relieved laughter.

McBride and the Archdruidh came next. Quirk stood and watched them, wondering what was going on, how they should play this, how it would all turn out. He thought of something that McBride had said before, something about the Druidh wanting to make the islanders slaves. And now this strange behaviour with the Archdruidh.

As before, a few pieces of understanding slotted quietly together in his mind. He thought then that he maybe knew where it was that McBride went when he set off ashore by himself. Things mentioned over the years, looks in his eye, some guesses began to add up. The crew liked to joke that he was off drinking and womanising. But no, that wasn't it.

They were halfway across now. He could see McBride's face, the Archdruidh's back. The crown of mistletoe and gorse rising and falling in the heavy swell. McBride was talking. He had stopped rowing now.

"You don't recognize me, do you?" McBride asked.

The Archdruidh looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. Until then he had paid him no real attention, his mind clearly elsewhere. He was just some sailor, convenient but unimportant.

"I meet so many people," the Archdruidh said, smiling ruefully at the burdens of his office.

"Of course," replied McBride, "I suppose I was much younger then. I have seen you from afar often enough though."

The Archdruidh did not bother to reply, as if being watched was only what he expected. There was silence for a moment as they bobbed together in the coracle. McBride, still holding the oars up out of the water, surveyed the sea as if waiting for something.

"You should know," he said at last, "that all your long plans, your schemes and plots, all the people you destroyed because they were in your way—all of it will come to nothing. People will stop you. In fact, I will stop you."

The Archdruidh opened his mouth, about to reply, amusement clear on his face.

As Quirk looked on, another big wave rolled in, slipping around *Sheerwater* and on to the coracle. McBride would see it coming, would position them to ride over it. Quirk *knew* he would. But he didn't. Instead McBride was speaking again. Quirk was about to shout a desperate warning when the wave hit, flipping the coracle up into the air for a moment, nearly turning it right over.

McBride must have braced himself, knowing what was coming. The Archdruidh was caught unawares. He half-jumped, half-fell out of the skipping coracle, landing back in the water a good yard away from where McBride sat.

There was a cry then, and a flurry of splashing as the Archdruidh struggled to find the air. But either he couldn't swim, or his clothes were too heavy, or something else pulled him down. A few, brief moments of splashing and his efforts ended. McBride looked on all the while, impassively, holding his position with expert ease.

The Archdruidh slipped down into the waters. All that was left was a quiet sea and McBride alone in his coracle and the crown of mistletoe and gorse floating there on the waves.

McBride waited for a few moments, paddling around in little circles. Then he continued on his way back.

"Glad to have you back safe and sound, McBride."

Quirk helped to haul him aboard. There was a moment when they looked at each other with complete openness, so that Quirk knew that McBride had deliberately drowned the Archdruidh of Mann and McBride saw that he knew. For that moment it seemed as if a tie as strong as any ship's rope held them fast together, and that the world went quiet around them.

"Next time we're in port, I'm thinking we should maybe go ashore together?"

McBride smiled a little at that, looked slightly unsure also.

"Aye, Captain?"

No one else was near. No one else could hear their words.

"Tell me, who was it? Your lover?"

McBride sighed. "No. My mother. I was only a boy when they came for her. She had the craft, the second sight. She was a Firegiver and she healed the cattle. And the people sometimes. They denounced her though. *He* denounced her. I remember him. This was long before he was Archdruidh. But they took her off and tried her, put her into a spiked barrel and pushed her down that hill."

"She's at Slieu-Whallian?"

"Aye."

They stood there for a time, saying nothing. Mac Lir was up in the bows, watching the wind and the waves, occasionally glancing back at them.

"McBride, I need to go back there. To thank Caillagh-Ny-Ghueshag. I'm thinking we could

walk that path together maybe?"

He smiled at that, warmly this time. "Aye, Captain. We could that."

Quirk smiled too. Above the bows, over the sea, the lights of the houses were beginning to come on from the shore.

The End

Simon writes fiction, poetry and computer software, although usually not at the same time. His fiction has appeared in Nemonymous, Here & Now, Albedo One, Redsine, Quantum Muse, Kimota, F/SF and Beyond The Rose amongst others. He lives in the UK with Alison, their two young daughters Eleanor and Rose, as well as one and a half black cats. A Sorcerous Mist is based on myths and legends of the Isle of Man, where he grew up.

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walls of the surrounding cavern.

One, the goblin bearing the lantern, stepped forward, peering down at him through the shadows. "Looks strong. We'll get some good work out've this one." He prodded Gryfin with the toe of one sturdy boot. "Get 'im a pick, and a barrow, and take 'im to the mines with the others."

He turned, starting to walk off down the tunnel, and other goblins reached for Gryfin, tugging him till he stood, hunched over in the low roofed cave.

"Wait!" Gryfin's voice sounded loud and high-pitched after the gravelly tones of the goblin. "Please...I want to see your cities. I want to live with you." He took a hesitant step towards the leader. "I'm one of you. I have to be..." His voice trailed off as the lantern-bearing goblin turned back to him, frowning.

"You're ours, true enough. Ours by right've capture, not've blood." He frowned again, at the sorrowful expression on Gryfin's face. "Don't worry, lad. We'll treat you well enough, if you work hard. You'll see our cities, eat our food. Starving and whippings make for poor workers." With that he swung slowly round and strode off down a tunnel.

Stunned and heart-sad, Gryfin followed, jostled round by marching goblins. Whenever he showed signs of straying from their path, picks and shovels would be raised, threatening, and goblin faces would grow stonier, colder, till once again he matched the troop's pace and direction.

The goblins led him down long tunnels, deeper and deeper into the heart of the earth. His feet grew sore and his back ached from stooping. His stomach growled and grumbled from lack of dinner. Finally, when he thought he could go no farther, they stopped marching, and Gryfin realized that he was in a great cavern, bigger than any he'd ever seen. The walls were carved from loving stone, and glistened with flecks of precious metals, and gems of all sizes and shapes. Scattered about like huge stalagmites jutting up from the cavern's floor were stone houses, shops, and meeting halls. Gem lanterns hung from rocky pillars, twinkling like pale stars and shedding their dim light over the city. In the streets between the houses, goblin men and maidens walked and talked and carried out their daily plans.

Gryfin could scarcely breathe as he looked out over the shadowy beauty of the scene. "It's wonderful...just like I've always dreamed! Will I live here, with you?"

He started, hesitantly, towards one of the larger buildings, but one of his captors hooked a miner's pick round his knee and sent him sprawling. "What? You think you're noble born? Worthy to live in our finest houses?" Around Gryfin, the goblins started laughing, low and cruel. It was the first sign of true feeling he'd heard from them, and not a reassuring sound. "Think again, surface lad. You're for the pits. The gems you mine will serve to decorate some goblin lord's house."

The goblins clustered closer as Gryfin slowly stood. They marched him through the cavern, and out again on the other side. Down, they went, and further down, until at last they reached a warm, dank hole in the ground.

"This's your home." The goblins lowered a ladder into the pit, and hurried Gryfin down it. They followed, placing a diamond lantern, a flask of water, and a satchel of foul-looking food onto the ground. "It's warm enough that you'll have no need of blankets. And here, on this wall, is where you'll mine." They showed Gryfin how to free gems from the stone walls, and gave him a sturdy pick and a wheeled barrow to carry gems and ore.

"You're safe here, lad," a goblin said. "Safe and ours." They climbed the ladder, and drew it up after them, leaving Gryfin down below. "Don't try to dig your way out. Or do, as long as you find plenty of gems while you try. Do good work. We'll check on you twice daily, and bring you more supplies. If you stop working, you stop eating."

The goblins grew silent then, and after a while Gryfin heard their booted feet stomping off along the passageway. Sighing, he ate some tasteless food, and drank some water. Then he lifted the pick and started mining.

The days went by slowly. With nothing else to do, he learned mining swiftly and soon was finding fine gems and metals. A few times a day the goblins would come and check on him, commenting on his work, giving bland, dry advice, and leaving more food and water for him. Sometimes, when his work was especially good, they'd bring him goblin treats, live cave mice or centipedes the size of his arm. Always, he tried to be polite, tried to show the goblins that he was worthy to be truly one of them. But when they were gone he would free the mice, and stay as far as possible away from the centipedes.

In time, he found himself longing for the kindly lake folk, for the bright lit surface, and favorite foods, games, and people. And, as days dragged into weeks, and weeks to months, he grew weak, and sickly, and the weight of his pick grew to be too much to lift. Finally, worried as the gems he mined grew fewer and fewer, the goblins called in an old wise goblin woman to see what could be done.

The wisewoman peered at Gryfin through small, pale eyes. She poked at him, prodded him and placed her wrinkled hand on his forehead. "Hrmph," she said. And "hrmph," again, as her eyes closed, and her palm trembled over his hair. Then, all at once, her eyes snapped open again, glittering with greed. She turned to the other goblins.

"This lad has no true illness. He's not fevered or chilled. He's not eaten've the mushrooms've mindlessness, or drunk the waters've dreams. And yet..." her voice trailed off a moment, cracking with age, and a type of hunger. "And yet, I am wise. I can see more than what's spoken. There's something wrong with the lad that will kill'im in time. I've seen something in 'is mind, a blue, glittering gem, set in a rock face of green darker and richer than emeralds. He misses it, wants it, needs it." Her wrinkled old hands closed into fists. "A gem so grand, who could blame him?"

She turned to Gryfin. "You'll get your wish, lad. You'll see that gem again. Take us to it, in whatever tunnel you saw it, and it will be set in the roof of the goblin king's own castle, and you can serve him there. Just take us..." Her hand closed on Gryfin's wrist, squeezing, "Take us to that gem."

Gryfin sat for a moment, slumped on the floor. What gem could she mean? The lake folk had few jewels, and those they did have were smaller and poorer than the ones he'd seen below the surface. In all his wanderings through the upper tunnels he'd seen nothing to match the splendors further down.

And yet, still...the woman's description...a sparkling blue gem, set in green. It stirred memories, painted a picture in his mind.

And then, suddenly, he knew what she spoke of, and what to do.

"I'll lead you there." His voice was firm now. He felt strength flooding though his limbs.

The wisewoman stepped forward, looking up at him carefully. "Your oath on it? You'll lead us straight there? No tricks? Remember, lad, I'm wise. I'll know if you lie to me."

Gryfin nodded solemnly. "If you take me back to where I was found I can lead you by the straightest paths I know. I swear it."

The wisewoman closed her eyes then nodded. "The lad speaks truth."

Swiftly a party was organized to go with Gryfin to the resting place of the great jewel. A troop of goblins carrying their best picks led Gryfin back to the cave where they'd found him, and

then stood back a bit to let him get his bearings.

"This way." Gryfin started off up a long tunnel, leading the goblins through its twists and turns. He glanced back at them sometimes, smiling secretly at their confused, lost looks, and the greed in their eyes. It was obvious that they were not familiar with these higher passages. How could he have ever thought their faces expressionless?

One turn, another, higher and higher, and... "It's just around this corner, follow me close."

Gryfin darted through the tunnel opening, eyes closed to slits to protect them against the brightness of the afternoon sun.

The goblins were not so forewarned. Gasping, blinking, their picks falling from hands that rose to wipe tearblinded eyes, they fled back into the caves.

Gryfin waited for his eyes to readjust somewhat to the light, then strode forward, gazing at the lake. "Here," he sighed softly, looking out over its glittering blue waters, surrounded by the rich green trees, "I've kept my promise."

He stood there looking for a while longer, then turned and made his way around the lake to the village. The lake people met him with joyous cries, and tears, and arms held wide.

Gryfin never again went into the deep tunnels. Still, sometimes, when memories called him, he would sit in darkness in the higher caves, thinking of the twinkle of gem stars over the bustle of the underground city, and sigh a bit for things left behind.

And, deep within the earth, their eyes finally healed, a small troop of goblin miners worked in silence, their eyes bright with their own memory, and their faces dark with regret. For they knew well that never, ever, in their underground world, would they find a jewel like the one they'd seen in that one blinding flash of light, all blue and green and rich with life.

The End

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff is an Aurora Award winning poet/writer from the west coast of Canada. Her work has appeared in such magazines as Weird Tales, On Spec, Aoife's Kiss, and Dreams & Nightmares, as well as in many anthologies and online publications.

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Her story explained our travel-worn attire and had the added bonus of allowing me to shield my face within my cowl without seeming to hide anything. I had no wish to reveal my identity until we stood within the palace's gleaming walls.

Morning turned over to afternoon, and a dusky light bathed the palace's towers and walls. As we neared the gates of the city, everyone in our group relaxed.

A large bluff man, with the dark spots of a farmer on his arms and cheeks, proclaimed to the guards, "It is grand to be within the city walls at last." A murmur of agreement swept through the travelers.

His words surprised me.

I turned to Morgan and whispered, "They seem relieved to have made it here."

"Maybe bandits plague the roadways," she replied.

Perhaps, I thought. They certainly acted as though they expected an attack. Our turn came and I forgot about the farmer's words.

A burly guard demanded our business. Morgan repeated her story and asked for directions to the nearest inn with a good reputation and good food.

He laughed. "Hatchet Jack's; three doors down from the harbor master's office." He motioned us through.

* * *

We walked slowly along the harbor road. Phobos still carried only Morgan. He had valiantly brought us through the Umbra, and I sought to spare him as much as possible. We crossed the quay, skirting horse-drawn wagons and longshoremen, to what looked to be the main road threading through the city toward the palace. The dockworkers carrying goods didn't give us a second glance, or if they did, it didn't matter. The better-dressed people near the businesses weren't so well mannered. At the sight of two strangers, a few men pushed aside cloaks to reveal swords. Inwardly, I seethed that they would dare to threaten me. However, I kept my feelings in check because the palace beckoned me as the link to my past and I wanted no trouble before I reached it.

We pushed through the crowd and continued up a thoroughfare wide enough to allow four carriages to pass abreast. The buildings in this part of the city changed from the rough wooden shops and factories of the harbor to those of well-dressed stone and finished wood. Glittering, jewel-pane windows, made from polished cut glass, cast kaleidoscopic reflections back at us as we passed. The people were more elegantly clothed too.

At one point my head turned so that a woman, attired lavishly in an ermine-hemmed cloak, saw briefly inside my hood. She paused, startled, and it seemed, almost, as if she recognized me. But she quickly entered a coach, and the driver clucked to the horses. The vehicle flashed by, the curtains hastily drawn.

Twice runners, carrying sealed envelopes, pounded past, doubtless headed for the harbor and some ship awaiting orders.

The way was steep, the climb broken by several large plazas filled with more people, outdoor cafes, and fountains. I let Phobos drink whenever he wanted.

Morgan had not uttered a word since we entered the city. She fidgeted with her cloak, and her unease once more set me to wondering what kind of reception I would receive at the palace when I revealed who I really was.

Thinking of this, I almost did not notice a commotion break out ahead. Then I heard

people screaming. Moments later, throngs pelted by us.

I pressed the stallion's reins into Morgan's hands.

"Stay here!" I ordered.

I made my way against the tide of fleeing humanity. They quickly thinned and trickled to nothing. I heard a loud screeching outcry—a high pitched, piercing shriek that made the muscles of my back shiver involuntarily. Approaching a plaza, I stopped at a corner and peered around it. I gasped. My hand went immediately to my sword.

Atop a marble statue in a fountain sat a griffin.

Its lion's body was tawny colored with a coal-dark mane at its throat. Great curving, black-banded wings with orange-brown feathers extended in huge arcs from its back. It raised a bloodied eagle beak and screeched defiantly at the now empty square.

Then I spotted a man, garbed in livery of what could have been a palace guard, held firmly in its front talons. Blood flowed freely into the fountain, turning the water a pale crimson. The man batted feebly at the griffin's claws. Folding its wings, the griffin tore at its victim's entrails.

I wasn't given time to ponder my next move. A clatter of hooves against cobblestones came from behind me. Seconds later, a large, sorrel body flashed by. I ducked to the side and glimpsed Morgan holding grimly to Phobos's saddle. Once in the plaza, the horse spied the griffin and reared in terror. Morgan slid off its back but rolled with the fall and ended up beneath a peddler's cart directly across from where I stood. Phobos galloped into a side street and disappeared around a corner.

The griffin tossed the soldier into the fountain. Unfolding its wings, the beast launched itself at my niece.

I drew my sword and dashed into the square, waving my cloak over my head and yelling to distract the creature. My ploy worked; it reversed course and headed straight for me.

I backpedaled furiously, whirling the blade in a series of slicing strikes, always keeping the point between the griffin and me. It landed and advanced warily, occasionally thrusting a taloned paw at me. Blood smeared its beak and the short dark feathers of its face. I didn't like the way it tested my sword movements as though studying for weaknesses.

It backed me around the fountain once . . . twice. The water sprayed and hissed in the large bowl, splashing the rim and the paving stones with pale, red drops. The corpse of the soldier bobbed up and down like a gruesome prize in a deranged game for trolls and ogres. Each time I passed by him, his unseeing eyes stared at me. Fear began to gnaw at me and I began to believe it was only a matter of time before the griffin batted my weapon aside and devoured me. Why it had not done so yet was a mystery. Perhaps the cat part of it liked toying with its prey.

It must have sensed my dread, for it now pursued me more willingly, slashing at my head and chest with snake-like strikes. I ducked and parried them, but it came on without a care. Twice it stopped, eagle head cocked to the side and one unblinking eye staring at me, as though daring me to attack. After a few racing heartbeats, it came at me again.

On the third go around, a rock slammed into the griffin's side. The creature reared and half turned away. I spied Morgan picking up another stone. I attacked instantly, slashing the griffin's unprotected head. A gash opened above its left eye and blood flowed freely, half blinding the beast.

It roared in pain, and, caught off balance, backwinged trying to escape my whirling blade. I inflicted a dozen more cuts to the body; blood streaked its fur. Determination filled me and I pressed my advantage. Claws flailed the air above my head, leaving its chest open. I lunged, aiming at what I thought would be the heart, but I slipped on a puddle of water and nearly fell. I

barely recovered in time to beat aside the griffin's counterattack. Even so, one of its claws raked my shoulder. A thin trickle of blood ran down my arm.

I feinted another attack, then ran around the fountain, keeping the curve of the rim between me and the beast. Instead of chasing me, it leapt over the bowl and extended its paws to cut me off. I stopped and met the attack, swinging my blade with all my strength. My body shuddered at the impact but I did not lose my footing. One of the griffin's forelegs dropped to the cobblestones.

The beast howled and thrashed on the ground beside the fountain. I moved in to finish it off, but it lunged upright and the other paw ripped the sword from my hand. My arm went numb, and I lurched out of range.

The griffin stood rampant, its bloody forelimb spurting blood. Even badly injured, I stood little chance against it unarmed. If I turned to run, it would be on me in a second with its razor sharp beak.

So I charged. Surprised, it reared and claws raked at my face. I slipped under the attack and slammed into its chest, unbalancing it. The bellows of its lungs heaved and its breath smelled like burnt cinnamon. The body fur was short and smeared with blood, nothing to grab onto, so I seized the mane and vaulted onto its back. I locked my legs under its belly. At the same time, my left arm encircled the neck. I buried my head in its thick hair so that its beak could not strike me and pulled my arm closed, cutting off the animal's air.

The griffin erupted skyward, but wasn't prepared for my weight nor the hindrance of my body against its wings, and it crashed back to the ground. It jolted and twisted about the square, and I rode the frenzied beast like a bucking horse. It leaped again, this time twisting to land on its back. Pain wracked my spine, but to let go meant instant death, so I gripped harder. Feeling began to return to my right arm, and I used it to lever the left even stronger against the windpipe. Loss of blood weakened it and the griffin's movements slowed. It rolled over against the base of the fountain. I swung my legs over the side briefly and used the momentum to hurl it into the bowl, where I forced its head beneath the water. I could feel its great strength ebbing. After a minute, the griffin shuddered and moved no more.

I rose out of the water. My clothes were soaking and stained pink; my shirt lay against my heaving chest. It had taken all my strength and I was almost killed, but I had done it—destroyed this beast that had outweighed me by five hundred pounds.

Raising my arms in victory, I looked up in triumph and received a second shock nearly as disturbing as this heraldic beast attacking the inhabitants of my Enion. I blinked, wiped water from my eyes. The statue staring down at me had the same face as mine. Sans mustachios. I studied my features, dark and dour. The eyes were not carved marble but agates, which bore through me. They seemed to be saying, "That was stupid, you dumb bastard."

I agreed. But the triumph pleased me, and I was glad that I had saved my niece's life.

I thought then of Morgan. I turned toward the peddlar's cart to thank her for distracting the creature with the rock but she had vanished. It wasn't possible for the griffin to have harmed her, so she must have run away.

I jumped out of the fountain to look for her, and at that moment, the sound of many feet tramping in the same cadence filled the plaza. Seconds later, a company of soldiers, carrying pikes and longbows and led by a young officer, entered the square. They headed toward the dead griffin, but at the sight of my pink-tinged figure, the officer marched them straight at me where they halted ten footsteps away.

I wanted to go after Morgan, but I couldn't ignore these soldiers. I turned to face them. As

one person, the troop dropped to one knee and lowered their heads. The officer, a Lieutenant, if I read his insignia correctly, and I was certain that I had, stood stiffly at attention and snapped a salute.

"Lord Qweg," he said, his voice rattling.

I nodded, willing this to end quickly so that I could go after my niece. But he stood rigidly at attention holding his hand above his eye. I returned his salute.

He dropped the hand but remained stationary. The men also came off the ground but stood armed at the ready.

"Welcome back to Enion, Sire," he stammered.

"There was a little girl here! Did you see her?" I asked.

"Sire?"

"The beast attacked her and I stopped it. Did you see her as you marched to the plaza?"

"No, Sire."

His nervousness increased. He was scared of me and scared people do strange things when they aren't given any tasks to perform. I didn't know his name, but he knew mine, and more to the point, my rank and that's all that was necessary.

"Clean up this mess," I ordered. "Send a detail of men to look for the little girl." I described Morgan to him. "And take care of the guard. Notify his family; make certain they are well compensated for their loss."

"Sire?" the Lieutenant sounded surprised. The men also shifted uneasily. By the looks on his face and theirs, I knew instantly that Lord Qweg would not have cared if the man had a family or not. It didn't matter. I cared.

"Do it!" I ordered curtly.

The Lieutenant saluted crisply and left me to give orders to his men. I stood shivering in my wet clothes even though the day was warm. I noticed a pikeman peel off from the troop and disappear up the road to the palace, undoubtedly to tell someone or ones of importance that I had returned. I cursed for not thinking of this possibility, since I didn't want knowledge of my arrival broadcast just yet. But it was too late to stop the soldier, and I would have to ride out whatever consequences it wrought.

Moments later, the Lieutenant returned.

"I'll escort you to the palace, Sire."

He pointed to the street where he and his men had appeared. It led upward.

I nodded and indicated that he should lead the way.

We passed by the body of the dead griffin, which the soldiers had finished fishing from the fountain. From head to tail it was as long as a . . . minivan.

Remembering this word, a spasm shook me.

"Lord Qweg! Are you all right?" the Lieutenant asked.

I nodded and we continued on.

I sighed. I suppose by now, I should have been used to the odd references appearing in my thoughts, but they came with such abruptness that they unsettled me all the same. I doubted that the people of this land had ever heard of Volkswagen, let alone seen one.

In the last three days, my brain had been assailed by many such meaningless allusions, all jumbled with my memories of falling, the burning wreck and rescue, and with my dream of the tall spire with its Black Castle at the top, the air dirty and choking, the noise ever present and deafening. The images that came to me were nothing like Thereon or Enion. Yet I was certain they were a part of whomever I was. While we walked along Enion's streets, I hoped

her nearness might help me put the pieces in some order that made sense. Though I strained to remember something . . . anything, nothing came of it.

The Lieutenant was asking me something.

". . . and we didn't know you had returned."

"It was sudden," I said gruffly, assuming that Qweg would normally speak to him in such a brusque manner. The Lieutenant fell nervously silent.

At that moment, another officer, a Captain this time, strode up to greet us. He snapped me a perfect salute. Over one arm he carried a cloak, which he handed to me. Like the one I lost in the fight with the griffin, it was in my colors—indigo with silver threads cast through the weave like moon beams. While I put it on, he sent the Lieutenant back to his soldiers. We continued up the hill.

The Captain was relaxed and affable. He treated me as though we knew each other. I did not recognize him.

His first words to me were, "Welcome home, Lord Qweg. Queen Adella will be pleased that you have at long last returned to us."

Queen Adella. I tried to think what this title meant: consort or wife? Or was she my daughter and had usurped the throne in my absence? The latter seemed unlikely or else the Captain would not have been conveying me to her so blithely . . . or he might be in order to put me off guard.

Since I couldn't ask about our relationship, I said something safe.

"I've been gone too long."

"Almost two years this time."

I had left before, probably for shorter periods.

"And you've changed a bit."

I was different than when he saw me last.

"That much?" I said with a tone that invited him to tell me how I was different.

"Mustache, thinner than when last you were here. But still strong as the Devil." He said the last words with awe in his voice while drawing the sign of the cross, only inverted with the point at his neck and the transverse at his genitals.

I didn't comment on his religious observance.

We walked on, me trying to take in the attack by the griffin, the soldiers, their reactions and the disappearance of Morgan. They were all parts of the puzzle of my identity. Morgan's vanishing was the most perplexing. She didn't seem the type to lose her wits and run away, and I figured she had lost herself on purpose. Something in this town scared her, and yet she had led us here.

Or had she?

From the first Morgan had been reluctant to come here and had only agreed when I promised her my protection. Quite possibly she had never intended to bring us to Enion, and we reached here only because of my mad run through the Umbra.

"What strange lands do you hail from this time, my Lord?" the Captain asked, interrupting my musings.

"Is it the right of soldiers to inquire after the comings and goings of their Lord?" I snapped.

He paused to consider that.

"Perhaps not, but friends often do."

I let a silence run on. I was unwilling to trust anyone in Enion, even past friends, with the knowledge that I had lost my memories. The more I thought about it, the Lieutenant's

apprehensive reaction seemed the truest one. Among the chaff of impressions that floated in my consciousness since my return was the notion I was not much loved here. I could not provide any reasons for this belief, but the Captain's hail fellow well met behavior seemed out of place. Most likely, someone from the palace had sent him to feel me out. That in itself was a good news/bad news sort of thing. At least they were not intent on killing me instantly; on the other hand, they weren't quite sure what my return meant.

I said at last, "They were strange and wildly dangerous . . . nothing like Enion, and nothing I wish to talk about."

We walked in silence the rest of the way.

Chapter Eight

From time to time, as the Captain and I worked our way up the hills, I caught glimpses of the palace, which triggered fleeting images in my fragmented memory. Even so, I was unprepared for its splendor when I topped the final hill and stood face to face with its spidery architecture of soaring spires, floating bridges and flying buttresses in white stone. The brilliant sight—gleaming white gold in the evening's dying sun—filled me with nostalgia and electricity at the same time. I wanted to stay and weep, yet the urge to stand within its walls drove me forward.

The Captain took me inside. Guards everywhere bowed their heads instantly as we passed. We gained several flights of stairs, that wound around a soaring arched entry hall of polished, white marble and dark smokewood, and then walked along brightly lit corridors, richly decorated in light-colored woods and smooth stone. I studied everything intently—the furnishings, layout, texture of the walls, the faces we passed. It was magnificent and royal, and none of it evoked any recollections. After several turnings and twistings, none of which I remembered, the Captain left me alone in a private study.

The room was airy with a tall beamed ceiling and a long, curved frescoed wall. One side was entirely bowed, jewel-pane windows overlooking a luxuriant garden. The floor's mosaic of tiny tiles in hues from cobalt to emerald told a story, ancient in all cultures, of a great hoary god blowing life into the body of a man.

A door opened behind me. Quelling the reflex to whirl around, I turned slowly. Instantly, I recognized the tall, athletic woman standing before me.

Queen Adella was dressed in amber riding clothes, the shirt deeply veed, showing off small, freckled breasts, which agreed with my tastes; long rainbow-colored hair flowed past her shoulders like a jeweled waterfall; eyes the color of malachite, the left one with a star in its center, stared at me as though it could see into a man's soul. She smiled, revealing small white teeth.

She glided across the room until she stood close to me. She was only a little shorter than I, and I thought she would fit perfectly into my arms. But I still didn't know my standing with her. The sword at her waist was loosened in its scabbard and the handle looked well used. I couldn't tell from her expression if she was going to slap me or kiss me.

She did neither. She lifted her hand and turned my head until she saw the crescent tattoo beside my right eye. She rubbed it, bearing down hard as if trying to erase it. When it didn't disappear, she seemed almost disappointed. She stepped back a pace, regarding me with that

strange eye of hers.

"Hello, Qweg," Adella said at last, her voice sultry.

I returned the smile.

"I'm back," I said. Then added, "Della," pleased I had remembered my name for her. A warm response flickered briefly in her eyes, telling me I was right.

"How have you been?" she asked.

"Drier and warmer," I answered, feeling surer of myself. I still didn't know a lot, but we seemed to be off to a good start and that made me bolder.

"I'm having some of your clothes laid out and a bath drawn." She indicated a spot in the wall that when I first entered looked like part of the paneling. I spied the faint outlines of a door when she pointed to it. I wondered if it had been a trysting place for us.

She added, "Go ahead. You'll find a razor with the soap."

"Thanks. I could use a long soak and something to eat."

"I'll have food sent to you immediately."

I didn't leave right away. Though I needed that bath and about a thousand hours of sleep, I needed information more, and I was determined to find out what she could tell me before I indulged myself.

I let the cloak fall to the floor and peeled off my shirt, just to see her reaction. She didn't flinch, which I thought a good sign. I winced when the wet material caught the cut on my right shoulder. Inspecting the skin, I saw a deep gash several inches long where the griffin had tagged me. Blood seeped slowly.

She saw it too and snickered.

"Still brawling on street corners, I see."

I laughed.

"Old habits die hard."

She frowned then.

"Right now Enion can't afford to lose even the likes of you."

Adella's grave tone concerning Enion so rattled me that I forgot I was worse than a stranger here, supposedly knowing everything about this place yet recognizing nothing.

"What happened here?" I demanded.

"Is happening," she corrected me. "You met one of the many misfortunes to befall us on your way to the palace. Slew it too, though by the looks of your wound, you were almost killed yourself."

Long slender fingers gently prodded the puckered skin. "You'll need stitches."

She motioned me to a chair and went to a sideboard, where she took out a small black bag like a country doctor might carry. She opened it and familiar smells of alcohol and iodine issued forth. She pulled out needles and sewing silk in sealed plastic packages.

I hid my astonishment.

"You're very modern," I said casually, indicating the bag.

She eyed me disagreeably.

"You don't need to fish for compliments." She expertly cleaned the cut. "Your gifts have been very useful over the years. I don't suppose you brought any extra supplies with you?"

I shook my head.

"There wasn't time."

Della cleaned the wound, clamped the edges together and sutured it with a running stitch, well tied.

I kept my mouth shut. Advanced medicine did not belong in a medieval world, but to mention it again would have only shown my ignorance. The only idea that made sense was that I had brought the knowledge with me from a more developed Tapestry World. But that avenue of inquiry was closed off since I had no knowledge of worlds other than this one and Thereon.

"Thanks," I said, when she finished. I flexed the shoulder and none of the sutures pulled out. "Good as new."

"Stop that!" she commanded.

Next she pulled out a syringe and a vial that read ampicillin on the side and pumped me full of juice to kill anything nasty on the griffin's claws. She laid a fresh strip of gauze on the closed wound and bandaged it.

I hoped Della would elaborate on what she had started to say before her impromptu surgery, but she just packed her surgical tools into the bag and put it away.

So I was left with drawing her out while not revealing my impaired mind.

"I'm here to help," I suggested helpfully.

The warmth drained from her eyes and face and in its place glared defiance.

"Perhaps you mean it."

I did. Enion was mine to have and to cherish until death does its parting thing.

"I do," I answered fiercely.

"How far can I trust you?"

"Far enough." I grinned and my mood became expansive. "It'll be like old times."

The corners of her mouth turned upward in a brittle smile, and she tapped her fingernails against the raven-colored wood of the sideboard in a staccato rhythm that sounded like time clicking away.

"So Enion is in trouble and you thought you'd ride in on your trusty white steed and save her."

"It was sorrel, actually. Can you think of a better reason?"

She shook her head

"No."

She looked at the floor for a while. Then the defiance returned to her eyes, only more so, like a mother lion defending her cubs, and I knew Enion was as much hers as mine.

"If only I could be certain you mean it this time. That you would actually stay and not run off on some adventure when the mood hits you, leaving me to pick up the pieces."

"Della, had I known of Enion's peril sooner, I would have come more quickly."

Storms flashed in her eyes. In a fluid, whip-second motion, she drew her weapon and pointed it at me. I pressed against the back of the chair. The tip of her blade circled but never left my throat.

"Enion lives in your heart, so you've told me. You would know her moods and disposition no matter what the distance, so you've told me. Yet, we have been under attack for nearly a year and you have not once offered succor. Perhaps you are in alliance with these vile creatures that besiege us."

Tired as I was, I would be unable to match her speed with the sword should she decide to use it, so I affected an air of nonchalance.

"Stop acting the fool and put that away," I said. "Would I come here and place myself under your warrant if I were in league with the enemy?"

"You might, if it pleased you. If you had something greater to gain." The point snicked once at me and resumed circling. "I rejoiced the last time you left. A week with you is an eternity.

The day I allowed the Shadow Weaver Qweg to win my favor and become my consort, was a black day indeed."

Consort! So, I did not rule here but merely lived at the Queen's favor as her companion. With a word, she could have the Captain and a dozen others throw me over the walls. From the look in her eyes, she didn't seem too far from giving that order. So, I remained silent and I waited. It was her move anyway.

After a while she relaxed a little, letting the sword drop between us. I breathed easier but let on nothing.

She stepped back by the sideboard, putting two sword lengths between us, but still kept the blade unsheathed. "Go on, take your bath. You know the rules."

I didn't.

"I hoped they had changed. After all, it's been two years," I said with irony intended to draw her out.

Her eyes narrowed, and the one with the star blazed through me.

"Stay out of my sight, except when I ask for you, and out of my bed permanently. I can't remove you as leader of the army, so I expect you to lead our forces like you have in former campaigns, but I will be beside you. And so will Peer," she added.

I pictured him—tall, with coal black eyes and long dark hair with a white streak down the center; stolid and not overly bright. I had appointed him Queen Adella's personal guard so that she would be safe whenever I was absent. I needed someone who would give his life for her without thinking. Peer was the man I had—again the only word that came to mind was "created," though this time thinking of it made sense. I had found him in some violent reality of the Umbra and used the Ixtlan Shuttle and the Shadowloom to weave him into the perfect loyal bodyguard for Adella.

"So Peer's still alive," I said lightly. "I'm not surprised. He may not be bright, but an army couldn't kill him."

She chuckled, smiling truly for the first time. "Yes, he's not as cunning as you are, but he is devoted to me . . . a quality I admire."

I bowed my head.

"Point scored."

My answer seemed to flummox her for a moment. Then her eyes narrowed and raked me up and down. I had the devil's own time maintaining my composure under the scrutiny from that starred left orb.

"You're different, somehow," she said.

I shrugged. "Time goes by; people change."

"Not you, not Lord Qweg."

She toyed with the rapier, tapping the tip on the tiles as though playing a game of connect the dots. I wondered what that eye had told her about me.

"Why did you tackle the griffin alone?" she asked at last.

"Seemed the right thing to do at the time."

"It would have been safer to wait for the soldiers."

"Perhaps, but it attacked a little girl who traveled here with me."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know. She got scared and ran off. I sent soldiers out looking for her." I decided not to elaborate on our kinship or that Morgan wasn't too keen on coming here in the first place. Given that my wife's reception hardly resembled a warm family reunion, I understood my niece's

reluctance.

Instead I said, "My time away hasn't been entirely unproductive. I discovered that Merlin Skye might be behind the attacks on Enion."

She stared at me blankly.

"I've never heard of him."

I hid my surprise. I figured Adella would have at least heard of my brother.

"He's another Shadow Weaver like me. He wants Enion for himself."

She grimaced.

"He can't have her."

I nodded.

"No, he can't."

"At least that is something we can agree on," she said.

She turned and walked out of the room sweepingly, if that's really possible in riding clothes.

After the door closed behind Adella, I sat wondering why I had not told her about my amnesia. She seemed the right sort of person to tell—capable, witty, intelligent and greatly protective of Enion. But my more suspicious self reminded me that I did not know anything more about her than images and fleeting recollections that passed through my brain like arcs of current. They stimulated me with feelings of strong emotion and conflict. Whether this was good or bad, I had no idea. Until I knew who my enemies were in this place—and more darkly, if they were in league with Merlin—it was better to give the impression that I was the same old Qweg. At least I had passed the first test. Adella accepted me, though I wondered what her left eye discerned in me.

At last I rose and tottered into the bath. I shaved first thing, glad to lose the mustachios. They fell into my mouth and were a distraction. When I entered the hot water, my muscles jellied and I just soaked, letting the heat and steam clean me. I kept the bandage dry, not wanting the wound wet.

Fifteen minutes into the tub, when I thought I might need help getting out again, the door opened and a young woman, with the body of a dryad and similarly undressed, came in carrying a tray with food for three or four people. She set it on a small table beside the tub, climbed into the water and proceeded to soap me. When she finished, she scraped my skin with a strigil, cleansing body and soul of the grime and stress of the Umbra and my fight with the griffin. Afterwards, she helped me out of the tub, dried me and wrapped me in a clean warm robe. She led me to the table and fed me. I wolfed down most of it. She did not leave when it came time for me to go to bed, and I might have taken food for the soul too. I don't remember. When I lay down, stupor crept upon me like upon a drunken sailor.

Chapter Nine

I opened one eye. Two large black viscous pools stared at me. Somebody chuckled and the pools moved away. Opening both eyes, I saw a man of monstrous proportion standing over me. Sunlight framed a halo around him. A white streak shone lividly in his long, uncombed black hair. His brow was a flying buttress of bone; tiny pits mottled his cheeks, as though whoever had

forged him stamped divots in their dark hollows; a large hooked nose jutted above soft pink lips edged by a black beard.

Peer was bigger than I remembered.

He tilted his head and the skin around his eyes crinkled.

“The reckoning day has come. You must pay for the flesh,” he intoned.

“I don’t believe this is the afterlife.”

“How do you know for sure?” He sounded hurt.

“Because if I were dead, the pain in my head wouldn’t be this bad.”

He laughed, a low rumble like a lion coughing. He leaned forward and pulled back the dressing to examine the cut on my shoulder.

"You'll live," he said. "At the rate you heal, you'll be good as new in a day or so."

I moved the shoulder painlessly in a small circle. The wound had contracted to a dark red line already knitted together.

Peer took a pair of scissors and quickly removed the sutures. He replaced the bandage with a new one. When he finished, I pushed myself upright. My head was a tired clutter of thoughts. I remembered eating and a beautiful young girl. Looking to my side, I saw that the bed was empty.

“I sent her away last night after you fell asleep,” Peer said.

I yawned deeply.

“She was harmless,” I said.

He snorted.

“A man who has survived a cut that would have ripped the arm from an ordinary mortal should know that nothing is harmless.” He pointed to the remains of the food. “Someone drugged your meal.”

That information snapped my brain awake, and a cold shiver swept down my spine. It was then that I realized it had been impossible for me to keep my eyes open last night in spite of the young girl’s efforts. Anger replaced the fear and I forced that away. I could have asked myself why, but the answer seemed obvious—Qweg wasn’t a very well-liked individual. I silently berated myself for my lapse in judgment.

“Sloppy,” I muttered aloud.

“Aye, that’s a word for it.” Peer studied me for a moment. “Lucky would be a better one. You won’t survive very long depending on fortune,” he admonished.

The casual bluntness of his speech released an impression—he was one of two people in Enion who could upbraid me without fear.

“Point scored. What about the girl?”

“She brought the meal Queen Adella ordered for you. Beyond that, her ministrations were her own business. She’s smarter than most kitchen drudges. When you passed out, she became worried and sent a guard to fetch the Queen, then stayed here until help arrived.”

“Any idea who doctored the food?”

“The girl doesn’t remember anyone unusual in the kitchen.” He smiled. “Someone doesn’t like you. Of course, that could be one of many who don't appreciate the fact that you've returned, even at a time when a great menace threatens.”

I looked closely at him. Unshaven, eyes rimmed red and tired; he had stayed awake all night with me.

“Thanks for protecting my back, old friend.”

“No need to thank me. Queen Adella sent me to watch over you.”

"My Queen cares," I said with some smugness.

"Or she loves Enion and sees you as the difference between survival and destruction."

I laughed.

"That works for me."

He grinned fiercely, huge teeth in a wide mouth. Everything about Peer was big. An image flickered in my thoughts at that moment. Once, I had witnessed him hoist a team of draft horses over his head on a bet with a tavern keeper. Since that day, he had never paid for a tankard of ale or a meal at that bar. But he was more than just strong. Take all the greatest swordsmen from Musashi Miyamoto to Cyrano de Bergerac and they would be as children playing with reeds compared to Peer. Peer knew an opponent's intent even before the man knew it. He was devoted to Della, and apparently, some of that loyalty spilled over onto me.

He stepped away from the bed to the other side of the room by the windows and began laying out clothes for me on a chair. He stopped in the middle of what he was doing and faced me.

"There's something different about you," he said.

"Della said the same thing. I don't feel any different," I lied.

"The guard's family appreciates your generosity."

"He died protecting Enion. They deserve no less."

"That's true, though perhaps it is unlike you to suggest a pension for them."

I waved his comment away. After a moment's reflection, he shrugged and went back to his work. I stared at the pattern of light the jewel-pane windows cast on the floor, wondering what these little slips revealed about me. Quite possibly, they might put others on alert and make it more difficult for me to uncover my past. I had to take the chance, though, since I could not be candid with anyone about my condition.

I heard a faint rattle of steel. Peer's own sword hung noiselessly at his side. I caught a glimmer of something mostly hidden by his large hands. His fists opened and in them lay the most beautiful blade I had ever seen. Shaking, I leapt from the bed and crossed the room in two steps to his side. I took the sword in my right hand. Sunlight danced in splinters and sparks along the tracery etched in its silver-steel blade. Its name came to me and I said it in a reverent whisper: "Thruvir."

A wrenching sensation deep within me, as if something was freeing itself, left me breathless, and some of whom I had been returned in flashes at that moment. From ore mined in the Umbra, I forged Thruvir at a place where tidal moons and gravity exerted sorcery on its metallurgy. No weapon produced by mortal flesh could stand against it. I made several cuts through the air, and Thruvir's song filled my heart as it came alive in my hand, an extension of my thoughts. Fights, battles, duels jumbled together in my mind. One image stood out above all others: for love I would protect Della and Enion with this blade. I strained to claim more memories but nothing else revealed itself.

At last I relaxed and just held Thruvir close to me, glad once again to feel its supernatural power in my grasp. I struggled to keep the tears out of my voice as I murmured, "I thought it lost to me forever."

Peer grumbled noisily.

"Did you think I would not take care of it? I placed it in the arms rack in your quarters, awaiting your return. I locked the room and barred anyone from entering it but myself."

So these were not my rooms. My giddiness sobered, and I sighed inwardly, knowing that I would have to relearn the palace's layout.

"I'm sorry, old friend," I apologized. "I should have realized you would take care of it for me." I made a show of rubbing my eyes, as if I were tired or beset by problems greater than he could imagine. "The last two years have been rough. At times I didn't know if I would survive to come home."

"They have been rough on Enion too," Peer replied solemnly. "We have been at war with a strange and otherworldly foe."

The uneasy feeling in my stomach returned. I figured I knew what Peer meant, but I wanted to hear it from his lips.

"What kind of enemy is it?"

He shook his head and said apologetically, "The Council meets in twenty minutes. Queen Adella will make the announcement that you have returned to take over command of our army as before. You'll learn about the enemy then."

"Let them wait. I want to know your version of what has happened."

He hesitated and his forehead furrowed deeply. I could see him trying to sort out a scale of conflicting orders. At last he nodded.

"Queen Adella said to take care of you. I guess this falls under that."

He told me all that had happened while I dressed.

"The first attacks came almost a year after you left the last time. They were singular at first, against woodsmen and solitary travelers in Mistelwood. But soon the attacks grew bolder. Homes were destroyed and families butchered.

"We sent out patrols. They found the beasts and we slew them, though with great difficulty. Other beasts came. Additional patrols. We won . . . we've always won. But more beasts appeared to take the places of the vanquished as if out of thin air. Always strange monsters, like the one you slew. Soon, they gathered in armies led by winged, stone beasts. Now we find ourselves engaged in an inhuman war."

He stopped and ran a hand through the white streak of his black hair. Worry lines etched his face and he looked old in the early morning sun.

"Recently they have begun testing our defenses, trying to find a way to break through. We beat them back. They are like nothing on this world. We don't know what to call them."

"Griffin," I said. "The beast I killed is called a griffin."

He nodded, taking in the information gravely.

"There are more, all of them frightful and deadly. Scorpion-like things with human faces, beasts with many heads, women with snakes in place of hair, creatures half bull, half man. . ." He trailed off, listening to me.

"Manticores, gargoyles, hydra, gorgons, minotaurs." I named them as he described them, and this should have surprised me, except that I realized they must have come out of some part of my past lost to me. Then I recalled the wolf wraith's comment about the gathering. Most likely these beasts' origins lay in the Umbra and were part of Merlin's mischief against me.

"You seem familiar with these creatures." Peer's brow creased as he stared hard at me.

"In my recent travels, I saw these beasts and others even more fearsome," I assured him.

His massive head nodded slowly. At last he said, "I don't know the names, just that they are hard to kill, and at some point they will destroy us unless we can find a way to stop them from entering Enion."

"How often do they attack?"

"Every couple of months now they appear. We have to mount constant patrols in Mistelwood and Tirach Mir. Of course, Artemis's Vale Foresters report whatever they find." His

features filled with admiration. “You and Queen Adella can be proud of your daughter. If we had a hundred like her, I would not worry about the outcome.”

Daughter! I kept the shock from my face. It seemed not a conversation went by that some piece of information didn’t slam into me, knocking my equilibrium for a loop; but this was much more than I expected. The thought of a child of mine fighting these strange creatures filled me with dismay. I noticed Peer silently regarding me. I wondered briefly how Lord Qweg should react. Most likely he wouldn’t give it a second thought. I smiled to cover my discomfort.

“If we had a hundred like you, *I* would not worry.”

He waved my observation away with a huge fist.

“Maybe and maybe not. I am getting old. Some day, perhaps soon, I will meet a blade faster than mine, an arrow I can't block. Afterwards, you can speak superlatives at my eulogy. Until then, my sword arm is at the Queen's service.”

“That day will be a long time from now,” I said softly.

I had been wrong telling Adella that Peer was slow of thought. He was smarter than most, just not given to witticism or insult masked as small talk.

I finished dressing and threw a cloak in my colors over everything. Thruvir hung at my side and I felt confident and secure for the first time since awakening in Thereon. I nodded at Peer and let him lead me to the Council.

* * *

A huge round table dominated the room. A small fire burned in a brazier at the center. Twelve wedges of polished stone, edged with snowberry wood, extended outward to create its large circumference. A single heavy chair of dark wood and burnished leather faced every section. All were occupied except two.

Della sat facing the door to the chamber. She wore a common soldier’s uniform under an amber and green cloak. Her rainbow hair, braided and furled along the nape of her neck, gleamed in the firelight.

Peer took the place on Della’s left. I sat opposite her. My spine stiffened slightly, uneasy with my back to the door, but I kept my face bland.

Della introduced me to her Councillors in terms that could be described as less than enthusiastic. Doubtless, there were men I knew from my previous stays in this world, but none of them played tag in my memory. So, I greeted them all equally and looked at each man in turn, trying to discern from his expression if he had drugged the meal sent to my bath. Nothing stood out above the usual signs of jealousy and envy.

After the introductions the meeting descended into a study in dreariness. Almost every Councillor had an opinion about the beasts and fighting them. Della listened to them all, giving each equal attention. It was a colossal waste of breathable air.

I did not waste the time, though. My instincts had already told me Della and Peer could be trusted, so I studied the others, watching for warriors who would best lead Enion’s forces against the beast armies.

One or two foolishly bespoke of appeasement. These men I discarded as useless and said so. Most of the others ignored my comments, taking their cue from Adella’s lukewarm introduction of me as her champion. I rejected them too, because they were more interested in currying royal favor than in Enion’s welfare.

Only one looked directly at me when he spoke—the Captain who accompanied me to the

palace after my battle with the griffin. I learned his name was Parsifal. If he held a grudge against my gruff behavior yesterday, he showed no signs of it this morning. He spoke of enfilading fire, drawing the enemy into traps and forcing them to commit heavily for worthless objectives in the battlefield. I thought him to be a good soldier and reckoned he could be trusted with troops.

After an hour, the meeting ground to a halt; the status quo maintained: constant patrols and continued training of the troops. Della stood, dismissing us with a nod of her head. The rest of us rose to leave, when she cleared her throat. The others, except for Peer and Parsifal who bowed and sat down instantly, were caught half out of their chairs and flopped around, high society fish out of etiquette. They finally fell back into their seats like salmon unable to leap the falls. I hid my pleasure at their discomfiture and remained standing, waiting for her orders.

She drew her lips back in a thin, overly sweet smile that I recognized. It left me with a chill that attended all such recollections. Instantly, two things jumped out at me. First, I *knew* that scowlish smile. It wasn't a sneer exactly, but her 'Watch me and I'll show you who rules in Enion' expression. I recalled seeing her do it many times before, whenever she thought it necessary to remind someone of who was really in charge. What would follow after was as good a slice and dice job as any court jester's witticism or insult. Marvelous to behold, even when on the receiving end, it struck me as one of the reasons why I loved her and would do anything to protect her and Enion from disaster. The second thing that bothered me was that recognizing her mannerism nearly set me trembling with frustration. I recalled so many fragments about Enion, especially vivid incidents with respect to Della and Peer, that it seemed quite certain I belonged in this Tapestry World. And yet the other names—jazz, Volkswagen, Pollock—and the images they invoked, suggested another world altogether. Coupled with lost memories, like the layout of the palace and my name, which eluded me still, I wondered at times who I really was and if Enion was indeed my true home.

I could have argued that I was Lord Qweg. Everyone told me this in the manner in which they addressed me and acted around me. Yet, I did not know it, did not feel its certainty the way others must know their place and history. The name Qweg hung like a remnant in the closet of my mind; when I reached for it, I clutched at shadows.

So, while I stood across the table from Della, waiting for her to put Qweg in his place, I pondered what that bastard part of me had done to deserve the acrimony of this beautiful warrior Queen, and more's the point, what could I do to make it up to her so she would once more act like my wife?

"Peer," she said, "show Lord Qweg what precautions we have taken since he last deigned to visit us. Let him review the troops so he can have first hand knowledge of what we have accomplished . . . without his help." She spoke with such sweet sharpness that the acid from her barb was burning through my cloak before she finished the first phrase.

Muted chuckles floated around the table.

I put the best face on it I could and laughed too. I was surprised that the violence that would normally have boiled out of me at such an insult did not rise to the bait. But then, I suppose I could not be angry with my Queen. However, I did note those who laughed (only Peer and Parsifal remained silent) for they would not find me so accommodating.

Then the meeting did end. Queen Adella walked by me without saying a word. The others filed out and none talked with me either. Parsifal gave me a broad wink as though acknowledging the uselessness of this crowd of camp followers surrounding the Queen. I couldn't have agreed more with his assessment.

But wars are not won by doltish Councillors. It is the foot soldiers and their commanders who do the real work. I would wait until I reviewed them before I decided how Enion's fate looked. I could be fairly certain that if Peer had anything to do with the training, Enion did not lack for a skilled army.

"Come," Peer said, and led me out of the chamber.

We walked toward an immense staircase of marble and wood, leading down toward the entry hall and the courtyard, when I had an inspiration. I said, "Take me on a tour of the palace, especially Queen Adella's rooms and my own. I want to see what you have done to safeguard her in this war."

Peer looked offended.

"Do you doubt that I would protect her?"

"Not at all, old friend. I just sleep better at night knowing she is secure."

"*I* would sleep better at night if you thought better of safeguarding yourself," he grumbled.

I laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, all bone and muscle, as hard as any stone in the palace. "I will; I promise."

That mollified him and I got my tour, all the rooms, halls, chambers, the kitchen and the midden, even the royal privy. Nothing I saw stimulated my memory. But the tour satisfied me that the palace was well defended, and I learned the layout.

On our way outside, we passed through the dining hall and by a long, dimly lit corridor nearly hidden behind curtains. I could see two guards at the far end of it beside what appeared to be a locked door. Peer did not even bother to glance in their direction, as though this hall and door were no concern of his. I looked and the two guards came instantly to attention.

Peer stopped.

"Do you wish to visit your weaving room?" he asked.

It made sense, I assumed, that as a Master Shadow Weaver I would have such a place in Enion. But how I would get through that locked door was lost to me. I undoubtedly had a key somewhere, but for now that part of the castle would have to wait.

"No. Perhaps later."

Peer nodded and continued out into the courtyard where the army was training. I stayed in the shadows observing. Men and women, almost two thousand, practiced with sword and pike. The soldiers, clustered in tight knots of three, fought back to back. At the far side of the area, another one hundred armed with bows shot arrows at life size targets of the creatures.

I asked Peer about the women.

"Queen Adella has turned away no one willing to defend Enion," he explained. "All have acquitted themselves well and killed at least one of the creatures."

When I had seen enough, I stepped into the light of the yard. Slowly, the clangs and crashes of weapons and shields fell silent; the thrum of arrows ceased. All stared at me. Some pointed and whispered to their comrades. They became as silent as soldiers are when in camp and senior officers are present; which is to say, they said little but their eyes and posture spoke volumes. They expected something from me, perhaps a speech or a dazzling display of swordsmanship, to prove myself as their commander. Whichever, I determined not to disappoint them.

Fighting first, I decided, speaking afterwards.

No sword is a match for Thruvir and while I'm not opposed to an unfair edge in a fight—only a fool uses honor as his shield in battle when his life is on the line—I needed to win these soldiers' minds and hearts fairly. So I handed my blade, along with my cloak, to Peer. I

approached a group of squad leaders. I chose the largest one, nearly half a head taller than me and about the size of a bear. His nose had been broken and smeared across his scarred face. He wore a cuirass of brass and leather and a steel helmet and carried a wicked-looking, curved blade, double-edged at the tip.

Snickers all around me, and I caught for the first time an undercurrent of hope that this man would best me. I couldn't help but wonder if everyone in Enion detested Qweg.

I motioned him to attack me, fairly confidant that he would be less trouble than the griffin. He did so instantly with more than a little zeal, slashing at the left side of my head. I waited until the last moment, then stepped inside the blow, blocking his sword arm and striking his breastplate with the flat of my hand at the same time. He fell and skidded backwards on his haunches several feet across the field, while I held on to his sword.

Gasps this time from the crowd, but I wasn't finished yet. I whirled his blade a couple of times to get the feel of it. It was heavier than Thruvir but well balanced. It fitted my hand fairly well. I pointed to three of his comrades, two men and a woman. They attacked me. It is usually easier to fence against three than one, but it impresses the hell out of the troops.

I dodged the first rush, stepping to the side so that they lined up one after the other, and I faced the woman alone. She thrust toward my chest. I parried it, riding my sword along her blade until it struck the guard. I twisted hard and down. She cried out as her wrist turned and her sword dropped at my feet. The woman struck at me with her other hand; I grabbed the wrist, pivoted and threw her in the direction of my next opponent. She landed on the grass with a bone-wrenching thud, halting that man's rush.

Meanwhile, the second man had circled to my right and now drove at me. I brushed his sword aside so that it slid by harmlessly but his momentum went unchecked. At the same time I whirled inside his attack and slammed my elbow into his solar plexus. He collapsed to the ground and I kicked his blade next to the other one.

The first man attacked. I slapped his blade away and took several steps back until I stood astride the other two weapons. I parried another thrust and lunged. He beat my riposte aside and came at me again with a flurry of attacks. I held my ground. He was a much better swordsman than the other two, and twice he almost got inside my guard. But even with an unfamiliar sword, I knew my strength and stamina to be much greater than his own; he would tire long before I did. He may have sensed this and backed off, circling me, looking for weaknesses. He attacked suddenly and tried to drive me back, but I stood firm.

We stayed this way for perhaps another minute, exchanging thrusts and parries. By now, the other two had recovered and circled me too, hoping to retrieve their swords. I had to end this quickly. I gave my opponent an opening by leaving my left shoulder unguarded. He took it. I shifted back one step, parried and rode the tip of his blade toward the ground. He tried to retreat. I spiraled my sword around his and snapped it upward into the air out of his grasp. It sailed maybe ten feet straight up. I grabbed it as it fell and, standing with one foot on the other two weapons, held the three at bay.

Now all the soldiers were truly silent with something like respect, if not awe.

I lowered the swords and stepped away, allowing the three to rearm themselves. I bowed to them and addressed the crowd.

"Today, Peer and I will teach you all how to fight like this!" That got everyone's attention. Then I spoke a few phrases—out of my scarred past, borrowed from Shakespeare and Patton, men whose names and voices slid into my thoughts like shades of pale memory—about honor and duty and the spoils of the victors. By the time I finished I had the soldiers cheering.

Peer and I spent the rest of the morning teaching them. I tossed the sword back to the big guy, who had stood by watching the fight keenly. I noted that he caught it deftly. He followed me around for part of the morning. I learned his name was Gawain, and until I challenged him, only Peer could defeat him. Gawain, in spite of his brutal looking appearance, was intelligent, thoughtful and a quick learner. I soon set him to teaching the others.

We trained long and hard under a hot, yellow-orange sun in a quilted blue sky just like the vision from my fractured memory. Several times that morning, I caught myself staring into that sky, drinking in its beauty, exulting in its limitless perfection. I knew that I had returned to the one place I cared to call home. I was free and, to a degree I had thought impossible, content. The fury that roiled within vanished to a trifling spark. I could have stayed here and never more sought my past. Then, the sound of swords clanging invaded my abstraction. I recalled the war and Merlin's part in it. The fury resurfaced, and I returned to training the men and women, driving them, testing them; for I had devised a plan in those moments observing the army before I made my presence known. I planned a raid on Merlin's world, and for that attack I needed to know who were the best.

Morning ended and lunch followed: buckets of water, a round hard loaf of bread and an hour of rest.

In the afternoon I watched the archers. They used a formidable compound bow made from bone. Two pulleys at either end increased the release power of the string while reducing the force necessary to pull it back. Peer explained that Artemis designed the weapons and that the Vale Archers fashioned them, using the segmented rings of the manticore's spine.

He grasped one and nocked a steel shafted arrow from a special, unused quiver. The pulleys squealed under the strain of his immense strength. The bow thrummed; the arrow whizzed beside the target and slammed into a block of stone in the palace wall. The face shattered in a mushroom cloud of chips and dust. When everything settled, I gasped. Half the shaft's length was embedded in the stone.

"It's the only weapon that can pierce the stone flesh of the gargoyles and the scaled hides of the manticores and dragons," Peer said.

I practiced with the weapon for a couple of hours, shooting nearly a hundred wooden arrows at the targets. The bow rested comfortably in my hands, the pull easy to handle, even if I had not been supernaturally strong. I acquitted myself fairly well, though not as well as the men and women who had been practicing for months.

I moved from the archery range to a ring where soldiers practiced hand to hand combat. A couple of men wore thickly padded suits and helmets with mesh over the eyes. The fighting style wasn't particularly graceful or at all complicated. Simple thrusts with the fingers to the eyes, knees to the groin, foot stomps, all ways to end a fight quickly.

The training stopped at evensong. A few small fires came alight. Kitchen drudges set up trestle tables and brought out platters of meat, baskets of the afternoon's hard loaves of bread and bowls of steaming vegetables. They passed around flagons of milk and cold tea.

Peer left to take care of the Queen.

I decided to stay and eat with the troops. Camaraderie and all that. And something more—no room for me in my Queen's bed and the only other place I wanted to be at this moment was here among soldiers.

Afterwards a few men lit pipes. I stuffed my own pipe and drew it to light. Feathers of blue-gray smoke rose above the firelight. Enion's moon appeared, a blue and silver orb balanced on the palace's eastern wall. Someone brought out a lute; another produced a dulcimer. Reed

flutes followed and songs filled the quiet night among the clusters of troops.

As if on some unseen signal, the instruments stopped. A few beats later, the padded hammers of the dulcimer struck the first notes of 'The Ballad of Two Ravens'. The lute and the flutes remained silent for a few measures before joining the melody. The whole camp softly sang the words about the slain knight laid to noble rest after he had died defending queen and country. It sounded like an anthem, and the soldiers' ardent voices reminded me of the honor they bore in defending Enion.

I might have grown misty-eyed as I hummed the melody with them. When the song ended, the players let their instruments stay silent for a long time.

Later, I walked among the squads. Those who had heard tales of Qweg remained wary and perhaps even resentful at first. But the story of the soldier's family, who I had ordered taken care of after the griffin killed their son, partly smoothed the way for me. I learned that it had been nearly two months since the last foray by the beast army. Men and women spoke quietly of the forthcoming battle and of home and valor, the way soldiers do when they will soon be called upon to risk their lives for kith and kin. Mostly, I listened and gave a few words of encouragement here and there. These men and women were a gallant crew, ready to fight for Enion. Peer had done an excellent job training them, and I knew the realm was as secure as it ever would be.

Men and women began moving toward their barracks. A few set up bedrolls outside. My pipe had long since grown cold and sleep prowled the shadows ready to claim me. I glanced toward the top of the West tower, where Della's chambers overlooked the courtyard. A light burned into the night through a pair of jewel-pane windows. During the day, whenever I looked up, she had been there, watching. Night lowered and she remained, the light limning her figure, until I left. At that time, Enion's moon glided high in the heavens.

. . . to be continued next month

Mark Reeder currently works for Centre Communications as a writer researcher for educational videos. His short fiction has been published on the web at Deep Magic, Quantum Muse, and Dark Planet. The science fiction fantasy novel, "A Dark Knight for the King," co-authored by Ron Meyer, is available from Publish America as a POD through Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com. He has a Master's degree in history from the University of Cincinnati and has studied the martial arts for thirty years. Mark lives in Boulder, Colorado.

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